Ninety One Whiskey

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/2362190.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warning:
Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Categories:
F/M, M/M

Fandom:
Supernatural

Relationships:
Castiel/Dean Winchester, Lisa Braeden/Dean Winchester, Jessica Moore/Sam Winchester, reference to Dean/OMC

Characters:
Dean Winchester, Castiel, Sam Winchester, Inias (Supernatural), Gabriel (Supernatural)

Additional Tags:
WW2 ETO au, slowburn fic, the slowest of burns, Bottom!Cas, graphic military violence, significant character death - which u will note is not the same as MCD, content warnings in full in notes at the beginning of the first chapter, this is not a nice story, Here Be Toxic Behaviour Dragons Because It's World War Two And The Gays Are Bad

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of Ninety One Whiskey

Collections:
SPN Universe Fics, The Destiel Fan Survey Favs Collection, LOVEIT, Cleo's Ultimate Guide to Fanfiction, My ultra favourite supernatural fics, fanfics so good they deserve a podcast episode, Angel’s Supernatural favorites, DeanCas favs de Lemon🩶, International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs, To Read, Favourite Destiel Fanfics, illumi's favourite fanfics, Re-Reading Required, finished

reading, destiel brainrot

Stats:

Published: 2014-09-26 Completed: 2016-09-06 Words: 401,183
Chapters: 20/20

Ninety One Whiskey

by komodobits

Summary

In the spring of 1944, the 104th Medical Battalion of the United States Army is disbanded, and its men reassigned to various infantry companies in preparation for their invasion of occupied France. For First Lieutenant Novak, this is less than helpful, as he has so far met his platoon's designated medic a grand total of twice, and has both times found Sergeant Winchester to be the optimum combination of reckless, arrogant, and downright insufferable so as to make cohesive platoon function near impossible. When the time comes to move out, however, Castiel has to reconcile himself to the fact that men are going to go down and trust that Dean Winchester may well be the only person who can put them back together again. WW2 ETO infantry AU.

Notes

Baker Company is completely fictitious, as is its involvement in World War Two, but all other featured military units and their involvements are real. All places, events and major battles are real, but minor conflicts and the way in which battles play out are a result of my imagination. The fictional contributions of Baker Company to the ETO are not designed to undermine the hard work and sacrifice of the real soldiers of the 29th Infantry Division, nor any of the Armed Forces who fought in Europe. To the best of my knowledge, this fic is historically accurate, but if anyone reading this comes across anything that they know to be wrong, then please let me know so that I can adjust it.

Fic warnings in more detail can be found here. Please, for the love of God, read them before you read the fic. There's a lot of shitty stuff ahead. Read it. Please read it. Read it..... read it.

Glossary of military terms can be found here.

Chapter 1: Slapton Sands

Chapter Notes

UPDATE: In response to a number of messages—please don't copy, translate, adapt, sell, or print and distribute. Having faced issues over privacy in the past, I would like to limit the extent to which my writing is distributed beyond my control. I'm deeply flattered by how much love Ninety One Whiskey has received, but I do not want additional copies of this fic existing beyond this post. Thank you.

"Autumn is like an old book:

Marred spines turn mean yellow,

staples rust red-orange.

Every stained page is stressed

by a splat of colour. Rough-red,

like an old tavern,

we become hungry birds

and prepare for fall."

--Mary Hamrick

2nd October, 1943

Dear Sam,

The worst has happened – I'm now officially in Britain. It's not so bad, really. We got off the Queen Mary yesterday, landed in Scotland and then had to get straight on a train all the way down into England... because, apparently, we weren't sick and tired enough of cramped quarters. It was

only ten hours or so though – you'd barely get out of Kansas for that!

I'm not sure how I like it. Everything seems - small. Cute, too. You'd like it. Where we're gonna be billeted, it's straight out of a picture book, I swear, all rolling hills and little houses with thatched straw roofs. A lot of history too. I'm glad to be back on solid ground, though, even if everything stinks of horse manure here. That boat over was the single worst thing I've ever had to endure. Thousands of us, all crammed in as high as the ceiling, bunks upon bunks, and nothing to do. Gosh, Sammy, and there weren't even any bookshelves for us!

No, you know I'm real proud of you, right? Don't let anyone at school mess with you, or you tell them I'll come back from Normandy with a bullet with their name on it. You can pretend I'm infantry. Don't worry though, you'll knock all those other kids dead. You're the smartest I ever knew, that's for sure. Good luck with your first day – I'm just sorry I can't be there to see it. I'll write again soon. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company D, 104th Medical Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

2nd April, 1944

The polished metal of the copper stripe looks beautifully neat against the crisp starch of Castiel's collar, if he says so himself. He smoothes his worn necktie against the front of his dress shirt, not out of habitual vanity, but because if tonight is going to be the first time he is seen wearing this pin, he'd like to at least look presentable.

There is a disruptive clatter against the bedroom door, followed by the creak of someone sticking their head in. “Hey, First Lieutenant Novak,” Inias says with deliberate emphasis on the new rank; Castiel can see Inias’ grin reflected in the small mirror. “Can we get out of here or are you still busy checking yourself out?”

“Do you want me to pull rank on you? Because I can do that now, you know.” Castiel glances one last time over his appearance before turning to face Inias, who is leaning casually against the doorjamb. Castiel holds his arms out a little awkwardly. “How do I look?”

“Like a perfectly handsome asshole. Now let’s hit the road, please,” Inias insists. He jabs a threatening finger in Castiel’s direction, eyes narrowing. “I swear to you, if all the pretty girls are gone, I’m going to make *you* dance with me – I refuse to have a repeat of Fort Blanding. I refuse.”

Castiel’s lips twitch near a nostalgic smile, but follows Inias down the rickety wooden staircase, calling a warm farewell to the owner of the house in which he is lodging, as he passes – a dowdy old woman who kindly remarks once again on what a dashing figure he makes before he gets to the front door – and then together he and Inias head down the narrow street towards the village green.

They’ve been in England just under eight months, and tonight the 2nd Battalion, as far as Castiel can tell, has got weekend-passes into Plymouth for what promises to be a couple of days of drunken rowdiness, bar fights, and sleazy attempts to make off with English girls. They’ve all been briefed to *play nicely with the natives*, as it were, but Castiel highly doubts that’ll be happening. Either way, he has a sinking feeling in his gut that the over-exuberance in handing out this many weekend passes can only mean one thing – a lot of gruelling training in the weeks to come.

“Nice digs, by the way,” Inias comments, as they walk down the road in the dimming light of dusk – in step, out of sheer habit – and he glances back over his shoulder at the little brick house where Castiel’s lodger is already drawing the black-out curtains, a good three hours before curfew. He shoots Castiel a teasing smirk. “How'd you end up with that?”

“I didn’t get it through entirely honest means,” Castiel admits. “Captain Milton handed it over as a reward for my promotion – said he wanted to *be closer to nature.*”

“Closer to nature?” Inias sighs. “That guy gets any closer to nature, he’ll turn into a goddamn tree.”

Castiel laughs a little at that, shaking his head. “That’s just what we need,” he says. “Then I’ll have to carry his roots around everywhere for him instead of just carrying his paperwork, his company…”

“His balls,” Inias chimes in, and they both have to hurriedly compose themselves to salute with the utmost sincerity as they catch sight of an unfamiliar Major striding down the street.

It’s a two-minute walk into town, where the rail station is already overcrowded with men of every shape and size, officers and enlisted men alike buzzing with anticipation – *“shit, how much skirt d’you reckon there’s gonna be”* and *“Plymouth… is that like London?”* and *“I swear to god, if I see that guy again…”* – and hopping impatiently to the edge of the platform to peer into the distance to see if the train is anywhere nearby.

Castiel and Inias weave their way through the crowd to find a place to stand, greeting members of their company with a wave, and members of their platoons with greater enthusiasm, as they pass by.

“Evening, sir!” a couple of the soldiers of one-platoon call, raising hands to make themselves known to their platoon commanders; one yells, “Hey, Lieutenant, you on the prowl tonight?” and it sounds like Fitzgerald, but Castiel couldn’t quite be sure. There are a couple of shouts of congratulations from those who either know about his promotion or have spotted the new pin, but, nice as it all is, Castiel is grateful when the train pulls in and kick-starts a new surge of excitement to distract them.

Castiel and Inias find Freddie Hester and Adrian Alistair have staked out a set of four seats in the first carriage, which are been fiercely defended on the grounds that ‘they’re officers-only seats’, but which Castiel and Inias take for themselves. There are a lot of soldiers trying to get onto a very small train, and as much as Castiel dislikes Lieutenants Hester’s and Alistair’s ideas about the special privileges of rank, he’s glad to have somewhere to sit.

“So is anyone else getting a distinct feeling that a whole-battalion weekend-pass can’t bode well for the future?” Inias says, grimacing as he leans back in his seat.

“I’m gonna call it right now and say that we’re gonna have to do another goddamn beach assault,” Alistair predicts, and he props up his feet on the edge of Castiel’s chair. “That’s my vote. Beach assault or bust.”

“No, I think we’ll be moving out,” Castiel says, looking out the window as the train begins to huff and puff ever louder, picking up speed through the low green hills. “Heading for a bigger town so they can start organising us. That’s my bet.”

“Beach assault,” Alistair insists, jabbing a finger in Castiel’s direction. His muddy boots shunt on Castiel’s seat, flaking dirt threateningly close to his dress pants; Castiel angles his legs away. “I’m telling you.

Ten dollars, right now."

"No thanks." Castiel pushes his hands into his pockets, feels around for the crumpled lid of his tin cigarette case, flicks at the dented corners for something to focus on. He turns more pointedly away from Alistair.

"C'mon, Novak. Ten dollars." Alistair stretches back, folding his arms lazily across his chest – the gesture shoves his boots more emphatically into Castiel's chair, jolting him sideways, and on top of that, Castiel can now smell dog-shit caught in the rubber treads. Alistair cocks his head to one sided, taunting. "You got ten bucks, Novak. How much d'you wanna put on it?"

"I don't want to put anything on it," Castiel says, "except maybe putting your feet on the damn floor."

Alistair's eyebrows lift high and mocking to his hairline. "Alrighty, Missy." He chuckles to himself, but obediently settles his boots back on the metal ridge of the train floor.

In his peripheral vision, Castiel sees Alistair's eyes flicker over the First Lieutenant pin on Castiel's collar – and thank God for it – before he turns to engage Hester in conversation. Inias joins in with some one-liner joke that has them all in stitches, easing the tension straight out of the carriage like a flattening tyre. Castiel keeps staring out the window.

It's just under an hour's train ride to Plymouth, a big city located in what some of the younger soldiers like to call the ass-crack of nowhere. It's not so bad; it's still bustling with life, even as the curfew draws nearer. As the train chortles and rattles on through the housing estates towards the station, Castiel can pick out a great deal of buildings that have been damaged by German air attacks, but it

doesn't seem to have dampened the spirits of the people he can see through the window. More to the delight of the other men, there is a certain part of town with a lot of fluorescent red lights on brick-wall building-sides.

The train pulls in; a whistle shrills; the men fight to be off first, jostling for position and slamming friends and colleagues against the rails of the platform as they get off, eager to be the first to get their hands on the best that British night-life has to offer. Castiel and Inias wait patiently in their seats to be let off, long after Hester and Alistair have disappeared in the crowd; they exchange a glance.

"Well, it ain't Bedford," is all Inias can say, and Castiel smiles.

As they get off the train, they are thrust almost immediately into a concrete roundabout, signs pointing off in various directions, with a tired little park, half-hearted daffodils clinging to the last lukewarm remnants of spring. It's a ten minute walk in any given direction to get to a bar, and so they set off in the wake of the other men's screaming whoops.

They find a street not too far away, with several little wooden-fronted pubs with signs boasting *ale* and *music* and *country heritage* lining either side of the road. The yells of rowdy soldiers can already be heard from the few nearer to the station, and so Castiel and Inias stray a little further down the street to find somewhere quieter.

The place they choose is still fairly busy, but containing a healthy mix of Canadian and Belgian soldiers, as well as locals, rather than entirely occupied by a 2nd Battalion brawl. Castiel doesn't recognise the music being played, but it's fast and brassy and he likes it, and the alcohol prices aren't too bad. It'll do.

They order beer, reconciling themselves to the fact that it won't be as

good as the stuff back home, and find a small table to sit down at that isn't too sticky. They sit for a few minutes, just enjoying the time away from HQ, sipping at the froth of their beers and digging in their pockets for a light for their cigarettes. The air inside the pub is already hazy with tobacco smoke; a few more fags won't do any harm. There are girls flitting at the edge of the dance-floor, swaying in time with the music and chattering amongst themselves, and Inias is wasting no time in checking them out.

"See anything you like?" Castiel asks, sipping carefully at the froth at the top of his beer.

Inias looks back at him with a sly smile. "Do you?"

Castiel kicks him under the table.

There is the light sound of someone delicately clearing their throat, and Castiel looks up, startled, to see a young, pretty girl resting her fingertips on the edge of their table. "Now," she says, her accent decidedly British, if her style of dress hadn't been enough to give her away, "what's a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?"

Castiel smiles. "I'm here with the rest of my battalion," he says. "Weekend passes. I'm here to supervise my platoon and ensure that they don't do anything disreputable or--"

"What my buddy here is failing to say," Inias interrupts sweetly, sliding an arm around Castiel's shoulder with all the charm of a million-dollar celebrity, "is how do you do."

Castiel looks over at him, at the easy tilt of his smile, and he realises - it was just a line. She wasn't actually interested in the whole story. Inias was somehow born with all these things engrained into his

system, and Castiel can just feel the overwhelming sweetness of Inias' smile. It's times like these that Castiel is convinced they could just send Inias into Germany and he'd straight-up sweet-talk the Nazis out of Europe.

Inias releases his grip on Castiel and instead slides past to take one of the girl's hands. "Second Lieutenant Inias Wallace, at your service."

"Well, Lieutenant Wallace," she says coyly. "Do you dance?"

"I don't know what a dahnce is," he says, mimicking the long smoothness of her BBC vowels all teasing shyness as he stands, turns, and starts leading her out into the middle of the floor, "but, honey, if you asked me to *dance*, we might be singing a whole other tune."

Castiel can't help but laugh into his beer, lifted halfway to his lips, as Inias and his latest catch swing out towards the centre of the room, light as the songs crackling from the victrola in the corner. The bar's dim, and growing more crowded too, as the evening gets on. The soldiers – American, Canadians, Belgians, Dutch and Poles alike – now outnumber the Brits, who don't look too happy with the newcomers seducing all their women, but that's their problem.

To be perfectly honest, there are even a couple of young women a few tables over, eyeing Castiel over their cigarettes who, judging by the heavy looks they're shooting him, wouldn't mind a spin with him at all – but Castiel doesn't dance. It's his own business.

Dancing or no dancing, Castiel is perfectly content to sit at his own table in the midst of the chaos, doing nothing more than sipping watered-down Blitz-ration beer and eyeing the members of his battalion who have filtered into the bar, lest they misbehave, but apparently the universe has other plans for him. Some idiot drunkard crashes into the back of Castiel's chair when he's just lifting his beer,

and so Castiel is slammed painfully forwards into the edge of his table, where he has just slopped most of his beer.

“Shit,” exclaims the asshole behind Castiel. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, I didn’t see you there—”

Castiel twists around in his seat, eyes narrowing, and that’s when the asshole – tall, freckled, Red Cross stamped on his sleeve – finally looks down and sees who he’s bumped into. His eyes widen, and then his face cracks into a grin.

“Aw, crap,” he says, rolling a hand over his jaw like the whole damn situation is the funniest thing he’s ever heard. “Man, I dunno where *sweetheart* came from, I just..." He suddenly trails off, and it’s no coincidence that his loss of heart is perfectly timed to the moment when he notices the pin on Castiel’s collar. “Sir. Shit. Sorry. I thought you were—”

“Enlisted?” Castiel guesses. “Or a woman?”

The smallest of smiles twists the soldier’s mouth, like he can’t even hold it back, and it’s not *cute* and it’s certainly not *respectful*, that’s damn clear – and then he says, “A bit of both, to be honest,” all tipsy bravado and boyish cheek, and that is just all Castiel can stand.

He pushes his chair back from the table, stands, and turns. The asshole soldier is inches taller than Castiel is, built more heavily, drunker, but Castiel is settling straight-spined into the patented officer posture of *don’t-fuck-with-me* and he’s been reliably informed that he could take up a whole career in making jackasses wish they’d never been born.

“I’m sorry,” he says, his tone indicating anything but apology, “but what did you say your name was, Sergeant?” He makes a point of

letting his eyes fall to the pin on the soldier's collar, showing him how easy it is to make note of rank before you speak.

"Dean Winchester, sir." The sergeant draws himself up to full height, as though he's at attention, which would be appropriate – except that he sways like a hurricane, because he's at least a whole beer keg over the limit, and still smirking like he's pretty fucking pleased with himself.

Castiel looks him dead in the eye. "Sergeant Winchester," he says, "you owe me a drink." And with that, he pushes his mostly-empty beer glass into Dean's chest – ignores the way it bounces off muscle, ignores the thin line of moisture it leaves on the fabric of his shirt – and he tips his head a little, expectantly. "Get to it, Sergeant. I'm thirsty."

That's when the problem really starts. Castiel can feel the anticipation of it swelling in his gut – the way Dean grins wider, tugs his teeth across his lower lip like he's biting back a laugh, rocks on his heels so he's bigger, moving, threatening. He's drunk. He's teetering, dangerous. And he's over-confident.

Dean chuckles once. Tilts his head to the side, arrogantly contemplative. "Sure thing. You want a sherry, darling?"

Castiel almost flinches. The sheer audacity of it is like a slap in the face; Castiel won over the respect and good humour of the majority of his company early and has, in some ways, been spoilt by not having to deal with cocky little dipshits too frequently since they started out two years ago. Castiel, to his own credit, doesn't flinch, but the ever-useless words of someone who has just lost all his authority – the words "Excuse me?" – slip out of his mouth before he can stop them.

That shit-eating grin only spreads wider. "Or are you more a gin-'n'-

tonic kinda girl?”

“Listen closely,” Castiel is suddenly saying, barely noting the words coming past his lips but feeling the venomous weight of them, “because I’m only going to say this once.” He takes a step closer until they are barely inches apart. His voice is low, barely audible in the noise of the bar, and cutting. “I don’t care who the hell you think you *were* or might still be, but when you put on that uniform, you give yourself over to the command of the United States Army, and, by extension, to those who command and outrank you – Sergeant.”

Castiel holds Dean's eyes and leans in closer – just enough to make him uncomfortable – and he lifts his eyebrows. He lowers his voice, and he can feel the way Dean has to strain a little closer to hear him.

“I’ve noted your unit, rank, and name, and I’m still considering whether I should speak to your commanding officer about this, but I think I’ve decided that it’s all just a big drunken misunderstanding... and I would recommend that you don’t give me any reason to change my mind.” Still holding Dean’s eyes, Castiel tilts closer still and he lifts his eyebrows. He lowers his voice further still, and he can feel the way Dean has to strain a little closer to hear him. “Do I make myself clear?”

Dean’s jaw tightens, almost imperceptibly, at the hinge, as he realises that he’s lost. “Crystal.”

“Crystal?”

“Crystal, sir.”

Dean Winchester’s eyes are green. Unblinking.

Castiel takes a step back, satisfied. “Apology accepted, *sweetheart*,” he says, his voice dangerously light and saccharine. He lifts his glass in one hand and shakes it a little so that the small amount of beer still foaming at the bottom sloshes from side to side. “And I’m still thirsty.”

Without further ado, Dean takes the glass from Castiel’s hand. Oddly, there is no hostility or resentment in his eyes; more unsettlingly still, there is an evenness to them, like glass, or like he’s come to some conclusion about Castiel already and is prepared to stand by it. “You want another drink, Lieutenant?” he drawls.

“Yes, please. Whatever beer’s on tap.”

Dean nods once. He looks down at the glass in his hand, still containing a fair measure of beer at the bottom. He stands motionless for such a long time, strangely at odds with the whirl and bustle of dancers behind him, that Castiel is about to ask if everything is alright. Before Castiel has even opened his mouth, however, Dean’s eyes flicker up to fix upon Castiel’s, and then he lifts Castiel’s rejected glass to his lips to drain it.

Castiel is speechless watching the beer slide into his open wetness of his mouth, the sleek pull of the muscles in his throat - and then it’s over and Dean hands the glass back. The glass glitters damply where his lips were.

“Yes, sir,” Dean says smoothly, arching an eyebrow as though daring Castiel to reprimand him, and then he turns away. Castiel sees him digging in his pocket for cash or change, and after that he is lost amongst the crowd of others waiting for a drink at the bar.

Numbly, Castiel sits down.

“What the hell was all that about?” Inias’ voice comes from behind Castiel, sounding slightly blurry with his first drink and rough with tobacco smoke.

Castiel turns back on his chair to look at Inias, who is flushed from the heat of dancing, and who frowns at him like he’s attempted to rob the bar. “What?” he says distractedly.

Inias rolls his eyes. He leans across the table and taps some of the ash from the end of his cigarette. “Word to the wise,” he says conspiratorially, “try not to get on the wrong side of the ones who’ll be stitching us back together in the future.”

Grumbling, Castiel reaches into his pocket for his own cigarette tin. He’d already seen that Dean was a combat medic from when he took note of his regiment, but it hardly excused his behaviour. “I think I’d rather bleed out than let him sew me up,” Castiel says sourly, picking a cigarette out of the tin. “Do you have a light?”

Inias’ pretty girl swings back over as he passes over the lighter; she drums her fingers lightly on his shoulders, peeks around at him and says coyly, “Goodness, are you tired of dancing already? I thought I’d always heard that you Yanks had stamina.”

The look that Inias throws Castiel is something along the lines of *I’ve got my hands full with this one*, but he doesn’t look all that aggrieved by it. “Keep that for now,” he tells Castiel with the twist of a smile. “I’ll be right back.”

Sheltering the flickering flame in cupped hands, Castiel lights his cigarette and watches Inias dip and twist through the crowd. The record has changed; it’s slower now, and they dance close together.

Castiel snaps the lighter shut, and tucks both it and his tin into the pocket of his dress pants.

A weight of presence nearby and a long shadow alerts Castiel that there's someone behind him; he turns to see Dean standing over him, bearing a tall glass of beer. Here, from this angle, the insignia of the medical red cross is more clearly visible on his upper arm.

Dean leans past and sets the glass down on the table. "Enjoy."

"I'm sure I will." Castiel picks it up and takes a long drink. He is bizarrely conscious of Dean's fingerprints left in the condensation on the glass. "Thank you."

"'Welcome," Dean grunts. He folds his arms across his chest. For a few seconds he says nothing, rocking a little where he stands, and scowling, but then he says, "That was the last of this month's wages. I was gonna spend it on some girl."

Castiel eyes him. "Some girl?"

"Any girl." There's that twisting start of a smile again, flash of teeth over his lower lip. He shrugs, and his eyes drift to the occupants of the dance-floor, presumably seeking out a partner. Out of the blue, and without ever looking away from the dance-floor, he asks, "Do you dance?"

Castiel stares, not entirely sure what's being asked of him. "No."

"Huh." Dean nods in the direction of the dancing. "There's a couple dolls in the corner who look like they wouldn't say no to a dance even

if you couldn't buy them a drink," he says, seemingly to himself, but he looks down a second later, catches Castiel's eye. "You sure?"

"I don't dance," Castiel says flatly.

Dean pulls a face, like there's no pleasing some people, and doesn't waste another second leaving to go find some pretty thing to spin around the room. Lifting the cigarette back to his lips, Castiel watches him – out of boredom, curiosity maybe – and sees that he's successful in his pursuits. After a short buzz and a hum, the victrola has picked out the next song on the record, and this one is faster, toe-tapping. A girl with curled hair and a pink dress blushes sweetly from the side of the room but can't resist the invitation of Dean's extended hand; she takes it and follows him.

Castiel exhales smoke, slowly. He can hear Inias' chatter somewhere nearby, the words unclear under the swell of the music, but the charm in it evident. Castiel can't find him in the crowd, although that could be because he doesn't really try. He's watching Dean's fingers curl into the girl's hand, guiding her back into the throng of people, twirl her out and back in. He's watching them laugh about something he's whispered in her ear.

It looks like fun, Castiel will admit. It's almost a shame he doesn't join in, but he really, really does not dance.

His eyes fall to the shape of Dean's lips singing along to the music, the solid breadth of his calloused hands on the girl's waist as he twists her from one side to the other, the taut stretch of his shirt over his shoulders as he moves. Castiel tears his eyes away, lifts his cigarette the last few inches to his lips and takes a long pull, letting the sharp sting of it in his throat wash over him.

Like he said – it's his own business.

3rd April 1944

Reveille next morning is oh-six-hundred hours, much to the displeasure of the majority of 2nd Battalion, having been trying to squeeze as much alcohol as possible into the meagre hours between supper and curfew – particularly in Inias' case, who has been designated with the role of ensuring that all the men get up on time, and who probably drank more than the rest of the regiment put together. Fortunately, Castiel only drank one pint of watered-down ration beer – one and a half, if you include the one that Sergeant Winchester threw all across the table – and so he's washed, shaved, and uniformed by ten to six, and able to do so without having to pray for the love of the Almighty to help him through it, either.

His elderly lodger offers him bread and dripping for breakfast, which he accepts, and a cup of tea, which he graciously refuses, and he runs into Antony Milton on road down to battalion HQ.

"Captain," Castiel greets, snapping into a salute.

"Morning, Novak. You heading to HQ?" Milton says airily, returning the gesture and then waving a hand to invite Castiel to walk with him.

"Yes, sir." They fall into step on the narrow road out of town and Castiel feels that he need to make some awkward attempt at small-talk. He clears his throat. "Did you have a weekend pass, sir?"

"No, I had to discuss some regimental rearrangements with Captain Everett."

"Ah."

They walk in silence. Shorn sheep huddle together unhappily in the light morning rain; a distribution truck roars past them, laden with what looks like enough K-rations to end world poverty.

"It rains a lot here, doesn't it?" Castiel comments, looking up at the heavy sky and dark clouds.

Milton ignores him. "Captain Everett was thinking of splitting up a few companies of the 104th Medical, spreading them across the infantry divisions. Apparently they're allowing for Operation Neptune to rake in a lot of casualties."

"Okay," Castiel says hesitantly, unsure where he comes into this – because he must come into this somewhere, since Milton is hardly the type to share and care for the sake of it. "Will I...?"

"Baker's getting five new medics – four ninety-one-whiskeys, one ninety-one-victor. Your platoon will be getting one new man."

"Yes, sir. Any names I'll need to familiarise myself with?"

"None that I know yet. Everett's still trying to work out the logistics of it. A few companies will need to be completely reorganised, although we should be fine." By this time, they're coming to the rows of battered corrugated buildings of battalion HQ, the gravel parade-ground and the neat rows of soldiers already in their places. Milton pauses. "I promise that as soon as I know, you'll know."

"Thank you, sir."

Milton tugs on the fore-facing peak of his garrison cap with one hand, smoothes one side of it with the other. “I had a briefing last night which implied that today we might be moving out to a new base along the coast, somewhere with a port,” he says. “I’ll speak to our superiors about it. If you take the company for calisthenics – nothing too messy – then I’ll be back by oh-nine-hundred hours to brief you further about the battalion’s movements. We may need to pack up altogether.”

“Yes, sir.”

Attention-snap-salute, and Milton is gone.

Damnit. When Castiel was discussing the meaning of the whole-battalion weekend pass with the other lieutenants on the train, he hadn’t actually hoped that he’d be right. They’re already on the coastline for intensive assault training in preparation for Operation Neptune, and moving somewhere bigger, with more boat-holding capacity, can only mean that the deadline for the Operation in question is closer than ever before.

He turns to see his company hurrying down to meet him, groaning amongst themselves and trying to arrange themselves into some form of sobriety.

“Morning, gents,” he says as they fall into parade formation. He glances back along the path into Slapton, where he can see Inias, plus Lieutenant Hester and First Sergeant Milligan, all nursing their hangovers. Castiel returns to face the men in front of him. “Did you all have a good night out?”

“Oh yeah,” laughs Private Gallagher, throwing some of his friends a knowing look. “Ask Alfie what he got up to, sir – he’ll tell you he, uh, *lost* something real precious.”

Private Wilson flushes bright red in the first row, but grins sheepishly. “What can I say, sir?” he says. “The British girls like me better than they did back home.”

Someone near the back lets out a cough that sounds suspiciously like *Fort Blanding* – Inias, who has only just arrived, frowns unhappily, and is received by teasing pats on the shoulder and patronising apologies.

“What happens in Florida stays in Florida,” Corporal Ash Lowell says mock-gravely, bowing his head as though to respect the dead – the death of Inias’ dignity, maybe – and some privates nearby cackle amongst themselves.

“Alright, calm down,” Castiel says. “You’re standing at ease, not back at the bar. Sort yourselves out.”

The men of Baker Company fall quiet and apologetically shuffle into more military positions, bracing their hands behind their back, and listen quietly for their next instructions.

“I’m not going to stand you to attention because I need speed in getting you all back up to the town,” Castiel tells them, his eyes flickering across them all. “You’d best all be holding sweetly onto last night’s memories – your stomachs, too. Three hours calisthenics drill. I want you all back here in combats, with rifles and webbing, in ten minutes. Any questions?”

No questions; just some moans of complaint from the men feeling bold enough to gripe in the absence of Captain Milton. When dismissed, they turn on their heels to run back up to their lodgings – Inias pausing at the front first to tease, *“ooh, Lieutenant, I love it when you get all bossy”* – and then Castiel, too, must double back to his house to get

changed.

The last eight months in England have been tough but fun, as the men smoked like chimneys, drank like sailors, and slept around like the world is ending – which, hell, maybe it is – and it's been enjoyable, at least. However, as Castiel runs up the stairs to find his boots and combats, he is gripped with the distinct sense that the fun is over now.

10th April 1944

Seven days a week, Baker Company have physical training, map-reading, close combat drills, weapons cleaning, and simulation exercises of every scenario possible. Some days they're fighting through forests, other days through villages (accidentally terrorising the local townspeople when they take a wrong turn), and one day they have to get an artillery platoon over a fast-moving river, which ends... badly, to say the least. The only consolation to be taken is that at least the company has trained together long enough to be able to work together through every crisis that is thrown at them, be it Corporal Campbell's shitty attempts at navigation or the goddamned boggy British countryside. Castiel, Inias and the other platoon commanders know their men and how to work them, and a lead-by-example methodology ensures cooperation and understanding; there are fuck-ups, of course, but none so drastic that they can't be resolved with a few sharp words and the threat of latrine duty – or so Castiel thinks.

They are just oiling their weapons and packing in preparation for a night navigation exercise when Captain Milton is called aside by regimental S-1. Castiel watches their conversation in the distance, and then, later, watches them walk off together, still deep in discussion.

"What do you think is going on?" Inias asks, following Castiel's gaze.

“Probably something to do with the medical transfers, I’d guess,” Castiel says. “Pass the rag, will you?”

“What medical transfers?” Joe Harvelle noses in, handing over a grubby scrap of cloth before Inias can, as his way into the conversation.

“It’s not officially any of your business yet, Corporal,” Castiel says pointedly, but he takes the rag and carefully gets to wiping down the greasy housing mechanism of his rifle, and continues with calculated diplomacy, “but if you were to find out that part of the 104th Medicals is being split up and spread between the infantry, you’d didn’t hear it from me.”

“Wait, so how many new medics do you think we’ll get?” Private Gallagher joins in.

Castiel frowns. “Didn’t any of your mothers teach you not to eavesdrop?”

“No, sir,” Private Wilson chips in from the far side of the group, not even looking up from readjusting the contents of his haversack.

Inias just laughs, shaking his head, and Castiel opens his mouth to dismiss the topic with the age-old *need-to-know-basis-and-you-don’t* line, when he hears Milton yelling for platoon commanders.

Castiel gets up, moving the disjointed parts of his rifle off his own combat jacket onto someone else’s, so that he can shrug into the rest of his uniform before he and Inias jog over to Milton.

“Captain?” Castiel asks, saluting, and then falls silent when he notices the rows of uniformed men lined up behind his commanding officer – all of them adorned with the red cross of a combat medic. “Are these the new transfers, sir?”

Milton makes a point of ignoring him and instead looks towards the other platoon leaders still hurrying in their direction. Lieutenants Freddie Hester and Adrian Alistair jog up, salute, and stand at attention beside Castiel, and only then does Milton speak.

“At ease, Lieutenants,” he says, folding his hands behind his back, and he waits until they have changed into the more comfortable position before addressing them. “Baker Company has been assigned five new medics. Three-platoon will be getting two medics – Hester, you’ll have a ninety-one-victor as well as a ninety-one-whiskey; the rest of your platoons will be assigned one each. So – Lieutenant Hester, you’ll be assigned one Private Nolan and a Lance Corporal du Mort—”

Castiel tunes out momentarily, because in the midst of all the combat medics being attached to their division, he can pick out the five already bearing the grey and blue insignia of the 116th, standing closest behind Captain Milton, and – motherfucker –

“—but it shouldn’t be any hassle... and Lieutenant Novak, you’re being assigned one—”

“Sergeant Winchester,” Castiel says flatly.

The asshole is even taller, even broader, somehow, in daylight, and he has this arrogant little twist of a smile on his lips, despite being at attention. Something like a shiver traces its fingertips up Castiel’s spine.

“Is there a problem, Lieutenant?” Milton asks, his tone cold and clipped, unhappy with having been interrupted.

“No, sir.” Castiel straightens, remembering himself. “We’ve met, is all.”

“Then he should make an easy addition to your platoon,” Milton says pointedly – meaning, *this is beyond your control, Novak, so you’d better just deal with it.*

Castiel swallows and sets his jaw.

Milton then goes on to explain that the medics will have their own separate training, of course, but that much of time, they’ll be accompanying their new companies on training exercises in order to try and integrate – starting with the night navigation exercise.

Great. Just when Castiel’s platoon has reached a stage where they can work together like clockwork, fluid in light or dark, responding to silhouettes and signals almost by instinctual understanding... and now they’ve got to fit in this rude, disruptive *hillbilly*.

Castiel doesn’t voice any of that, however. He remains rigid and obedient until dismissed, and then his eyes flash only briefly over to meet Sergeant Winchester’s before he turns to head back to his platoon.

Footsteps fall heavy behind him, catching up, and then – “Hey, sweetheart! Fancy seeing you here!”

Castiel spins back to face him fast, eyes narrowed, and doesn’t let

himself flinch back when he finds he's accidentally put himself in much closer proximity to Dean than he had ever intended. Dean, on the other hand, recoils back a little at suddenly finding their faces four inches apart; his eyes widen with surprise, and in the low, grey light of a cloudy afternoon, they look greener than ever.

"Winchester, right?" Castiel challenges.

"Yes, sir."

Dean's tongue darts out nervously to wet his lips. Something in Castiel is now aware that his own lips are very dry; he itches to mimic the movement, but he doesn't.

"Winchester, it goes against all my instincts, but I'm going to give you a chance here," Castiel says, his expression hard. "I can promise you right now, though, that if you really fuck with me, I will *personally* make sure that the only way you ever see Normandy is as a shit-stain on the bottom of my boot. Understood?"

"Sir, I was drunk, and I'm sorry for any—"

"Are you still drunk?" Castiel interrupts.

Dean frowns. "No, sir—"

"Then stop calling me sweetheart."

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows; his eyes flicker uncertainly

over Castiel's face. "Yes, sir."

Satisfied that he has put the fear of God into him, Castiel gives a short nod. "You're walking a very thin line, Winchester," Castiel tells him firmly, holding his gaze. "Don't make me regret this."

Then Castiel lets his gaze drop from Dean's face, taking in the neatness of his shirt, the press of his combat pants, the weight of his clothes on his soldiers, the shadow of the bulk underneath... he's tidy; well-turned out. Castiel cannot find a single thing to fault. Somehow, his eyes snagging on the stretch of cotton over his chest, the freckled divot of his throat just above his collar, Castiel finds his way back to Dean's eyes.

Castiel tilts his chin up. "Welcome to one-platoon, sergeant."

15th April 1944

Much to Castiel's disappointment, Dean Winchester fits almost effortlessly in with the others. He's in good shape, keeping up easily on company runs and marches, and never once whines about the weight of the battlefield medical kit on his back, even when some of the other combat medics do; he talks constantly, and at length, about his little brother back home; he's charming and he full-body laughs like a tidal wave, winning most of the men over with jokes so obscene that Castiel can feel himself go red listening to them; most surprisingly, however, is that Dean *listens*. In any drill, Castiel only has to twist back and call Dean's name, as an afterthought, mid-breath through an onslaught of orders, and he's there, ready to simulate field operations or a cas-evac – whatever's needed.

On-duty, Dean is fast, smart, sharp, has an intuitive understanding of

what is needed at any given time, and is easily one of the best medics that Castiel has ever worked with.

Off-duty, Dean is a royal pain in the ass. He's brash, loud, disrespectful, and seems to take a perverse joy in embarrassing Castiel.

One day, after training, Castiel overhears Dean wagering '*a special Lieutenant Novak strip-tease'* in a poker game in place of actual money, and when Castiel heads straight over to tear him a new one, Dean just blinks innocently at him and says, "But, sir, it's my birthday", much to the amusement of the men he was playing with. Another time, Dean wolf-whistles as the company is lining up in the mess hall, and Castiel stumbles; this time, when Castiel angrily lays into him, Dean just stares arrogantly back at him, waiting out the storm.

"He is the rudest, most frustrating person I have ever had to deal with," Castiel rages to Inias on a near-daily basis, and hates Dean even more the day when he breezes past at precisely the right moment to hear this and add, "Damn handsome, though." Inias snorts into his spaghetti at this, and then quickly rearranges his expression into something grave and disapproving when Castiel glares at him.

Thankfully, they keep very busy and there's little time for conversation – or arguments, for that matter. As well as training in field maintenance, basic survival, familiarisation with landing crafts, hand-to-hand combat, and weapons handling, they also find themselves being loaded onto battleships at least once a week for what Milton wittily calls '*invasion dress rehearsal'* – by which he means that they throw themselves into the ocean, haul themselves out and pretend to attack the beach... and then do it all over again.

It's exhausting, but Castiel's superiors promise that it's realistic, and that it will help them incalculably when the time comes to actually attack Normandy... whenever that is.

“I can't do it,” Alfie Wilson exclaims melodramatically, throwing himself down heavily onto the shingles after the last mock-invasion of the day. “I just can't do it anymore.”

“Aw, come on, there’s no need for that,” Corporal Mills says, although he also drops down to sit cross-legged on the sand and picks disdainfully at the sweat-sticky material of his combats. “We haven’t even crossed the freakin’ Channel yet.”

“Yeah, exactly my point,” Alfie groans, his voice muffled where he’s hidden under his arm, slung over his face. “Jesus, after all of this, combat can’t even be that bad.”

“At least we’ll only have to assault the actual beach once instead of over and over again,” Gallagher joins in.

“Hey, I’ve got a joke for you guys,” Castiel says, from where he is unlacing his boots one at a time to shake the water out. “What did the infantryman in Normandy say to the guy who wouldn’t quit whining during training?” He tips his boot upside, watches the water slosh out, and then looks pointedly at the privates around him who are waiting for the punch line. “Nothing, because whiners don’t get to go to Normandy.”

Johnny Mills gives a short, sarcastic laugh, *ha-ha.* “That was hilarious, sir,” he says dryly. “You should have your own show.”

“Would that I could, Corporal, but unfortunately I have to command this little group of whiny infantrymen,” Castiel says lightly, and he smiles as the platoon groan their offense and injury at the comment. “Right,” he says, fastening his boots and standing. “Up you get. We’ve got to be back at HQ in ten minutes for Everett’s briefing on beach terrain.”

“I bet I can call it right now,” Dean says, shrugging out of his combat jacket to shake the dirt off. He drapes it gracelessly over one arm, and starts ticking off his fingers. “Water. Sand. Rocks. Grass. Germans.” He holds his arms out akimbo. “There. Briefing over.”

Castiel throws him a disparaging look. “And you should be so lucky to get it in that order, Winchester.”

The grin slides slowly from Dean’s face, his features instead collecting into an expression of disgruntled resignation. “This briefing is a be-there-or-be-square kinda deal, isn’t it?” he asks.

“No.” Castiel stares at him. “Be there.”

Someone to Castiel’s other side chuckles to themselves; apparently the constant battles between Castiel and Dean Winchester have proved entertaining. That’s all well and good for *them*, Castiel thinks as he re-shoulders his rifle, but they don’t have to deal first-hand with Dean’s dogged determination to undermine their every action.

“Right, let’s go.” Castiel jerks his head in the direction of the path back up to regimental HQ for his platoon to follow. “Ten minutes, everyone.”

As he goes to leave, he gets a glimpse Dean shrugging back into his jacket, stretching to twist his arms back into the sleeves – the ruck and lift of his shirt where it’s come untucked from his pants, the flash of his stomach, sweat glinting shiny in the cut of his hipbones – and it catches him off-balance, solid punch to the gut of all the things he’s not allowed to feel.

Castiel turns away dry-mouthed, heart pounding, and he realises that Dean Winchester's arrogance might actually be the least of his problems.

21st April 1944

Orders to move out for Falmouth, Cornwall, are set for the third of May, moving the whole division west by truck and train. Until then, Baker Company throw themselves into obstacle courses, infantry demolition ranges, field training exercises, and endless re-runs of the beach assault. They run until their legs shake with every step; they march further. They go on night-time combat operations, Castiel and Lieutenant Virgil huddling together in the darkness trying to make sense of their missions, and Captain Milton leads them through house-to-house attacks on small towns. They dig more foxholes than they'd ever care to dig, and Private Gallagher's partiality to tuneless renditions of *Hi-Ho It's Off To Work We Go* as they work sets off a trend that spreads through the company far faster than Castiel would have liked – as does the joke that Castiel would, logically, be the Snow White to their dwarves. They all vehemently deny any knowledge of who started the joke, but safe bets are on Winchester.

Things are starting to fit together. Having been individually trained and polished for war, the men spend their time working fluidly as a company now, as a regiment, and, finally, as a whole division. Their superiors have been impressed with them so far, and now it's just time to fit them into the bigger picture.

They've been training as a division for several days, advancing slowly along the fields of Somerset and pretending to capture individual villages as they pass through. It's nearing six P.M and they are prepared to stage an attack on a tree-line on the far side of an open field, with the 116th on point and Baker Company leading.

They're just splitting off into platoons for advancing manoeuvres when Alfie Wilson twists his ankle.

The moment is absolute chaos, fast-paced and frenetic, heart-slamming – orders have already been given for suppressive artillery fire on the tree-line and Castiel is sprinting flat-out for the scream and scatter of mortar shells. The rattle of gunfire is deafening even with blank rounds; Castiel can feel his pulse inside his skull and in his helmet as an echo, and his mouth feels stuffed with dead leaves for all he can speak or swallow. He's coming up to the place where Captain Milton instructed him to split the platoon, lay down machine-gunners just back from the tree-line to cover the assault squad – he skids to a stop, drops to one knee and looks back to see his men coming up behind him – and that's when he sees Wilson go down.

He is running along between Corporal Mills and Private Spencer, and his foot just rolls over onto the side, and his whole leg goes out. He lets out a stifled cry and hits the ground hard, his rifle flying out of his hands and yanking at his neck when the sling pulls up short. As Castiel watches, waiting breathless for his machine-gunners to catch up, Wilson struggles to his feet. He successfully stands and manages to put some weight on his bad foot, but as he tries to run he nearly crumples again, and can only stagger forwards very haltingly.

This is an assault to familiarise the soldiers with having heavy artillery support even on small-scale attacks. This is not a low-level training exercise; no injuries are planned in and the medics tagged onto the end of each platoon are only going through the motions. By all estimations, it isn't a serious injury anyway – Wilson will just have to hobble until he can be given medical care after the exercise is over.

Dean has other plans.

As soon as Dean hears Wilson's shout, he stops and looks backwards for the source. He then immediately ditches the plan, so extensively explained by Castiel before the assault began, and runs back. He takes

Wilson's rifle and haversack – positioning himself carefully so that the majority of Wilson's body is blocked from view by Dean's bulk – and then wraps an arm around Wilson's waist to help him walk.

Castiel's expression falls darkly. "Winchester! Get back here," he yells after him. Fucking hell, he doesn't have *time* for this. "Winchester!"

No response. Dean curls his arm a little more snugly around Wilson, hoists him a little higher to take most of the weight off his injured ankle, and walks him away. Faintly, he can be heard speaking – "it's okay, it's not even that bad, it's okay" – as they hobble away together, painfully slow for what is supposed to be a goddamned battle scenario.

"Jesus," Castiel mutters. That's all the time he can spare to watch Dean's disobedience. By then his gunners have taken up their positions and are hard at work, and he has to concentrate as the assault squad run on to flank the non-existent enemy.

From there it's easy, as there isn't actually any enemy to overcome and there's no real question of the outcome. It's a simple matter of paying attention to their movement so that Castiel can get Private Gallagher to radio into Captain Milton to avert the artillery fire. It's the last assault of the last day of an extended field exercise, and everyone is relieved by the prospect of heading back to Slapton for warm food and showers.

It takes some time to clear up and clear out, hundreds of men scattered all over the place, but eventually they are all assembled and ready to form up in column to march back. Just as Castiel is rounding up the last of his platoon from where they'd dispersed to have some of the rations from their webbing, he catches sight of Dean talking to a senior medical officer.

Castiel pauses just where he knows Dean will be able to see him out of the corner of his eye and waits until they finish talking. Then, once the other officer has left to pack up the temporary aid station, Castiel approaches him and asks, “What’s going on?”

Dean doesn’t look towards him. He points over at one of the trucks being packed up. “I asked if Alfie could get a ride back to base, keep the weight off his ankle. It doesn’t make much sense to push him so hard in training that he won’t be able to do the real thing, right?” he says, and at last glances over. “That march back would wreck him for sure.”

Castiel hums in distracted agreement. “How is he?” he asks after a beat of hesitation.

“He’ll be okay,” Dean says. “It’s pretty badly twisted but if we take him out of training for a week or so, let the swelling go down, then he should be fighting fit in no time.”

For a few seconds they don’t speak. They stand side by side, arm to arm, with Dean’s head turned slightly so that he can look at Castiel’s face, which Castiel pretends not to notice.

Dean studies Castiel for a good minute or so before he breathes a heavy sigh, twists away to look into the distance, where the last of the aid trucks are rattling their engines into motion. “I disobeyed a direct order, didn’t I?” he asks, resigned.

Castiel’s brow scrunches up in the middle, trying to find the right words. “Yeah, you did,” is eventually what he settles with; it isn’t beautiful, but it’s true. “You disobeyed quite a few orders, actually.”

“I’m sorry it happened.”

Not sorry that he did it, Castiel notes. Casting off the blame as though it was something that simply couldn't be controlled – as though he had no choice but to help Wilson. Irresponsible – but then again, that's just Dean down to a tee, isn't it?

Castiel turns to face Dean, his eyes hard. "You don't get any bonus points for being a hero, Winchester," he tells him sharply.

Still facing forwards, Dean only shrugs and tilts his head a little to one side – the side closer to Castiel – when he says, "I'm a medic. Here I was thinking *hero* was part of the job description." He looks sideways over his shoulder at Castiel, that small smile starting quietly because he thinks he's so damn smart.

Unblinking, Castiel stares straight back. "It isn't." He does not smile. "You die, and that's it."

Dean's eyes drop to the ground in front of Castiel, the dry dirt and crushed grass curling. Then, very slowly, he turns his head back to face the front, in profile to Castiel. His jaw is a tight line. He doesn't say anything else.

In the silence that follows, Castiel is struck by the strangest feeling that he might have finally won something over Dean Winchester – but that it might have been the wrong victory to ask for. There is nothing more to be said in that moment; Castiel gives a short nod, straightens up, falls back into the role he's meant for.

"Form up, sergeant," he says, and the words are hollow on his tongue. Dean doesn't even look over. "We're marching out in five."

25th April 1944

Whole-company calisthenics is led by Lieutenant Alistair, and he relishes the role.

Push-ups: forty. Two minutes. Sit-ups: seventy. Two minutes. Suicide sprints: six minutes, non-stop, over an increasing distance. Star-jumps – because Alistair is an asshole with a sadistic sense of humour. Two-mile run, full combat gear: under fourteen minutes or march back to the start and begin again. Repeat.

They're the fittest they've ever been; they're ready.

Every man is in his own world, but Castiel breaks. Tightening his stomach muscles to pull up forwards, he glances sideways. To his left is Staff Sergeant Milligan, then Private Fitzgerald; beyond that is Dean – squinting a little in the sun, brighter today than usual. Tongue just poking out between his lips in concentration. Sweat collecting on his temples, shiny below his jawline. As Castiel watches, a single droplet beads on the surface of his skin, shakes free with the motion of the sit-ups, and slides, almost painfully slowly, down the thick line of the tendon in his neck.

Castiel realise he's fallen out of time.

"*—fifty-six – fifty-seven – fifty-eight—*"

He tears his eyes away, swallowing hard, and throws himself back into the exercise. He clenches his stomach tighter; shouts a little louder.

26th April 1944

There's a routine safety check for all soldiers – enlisted, officers, and non-fighting alike. Dean's are fluid and confident on the weapons he won't need to use. Long fingers, deft movements – safety catch, bolt handle, drag and *click* – thumb sweeping over metal on the way down to the trigger, fire off the action, safety and dust cover. He has freckles on his knuckles.

Dean lowers the barrel and looks expectantly across at Castiel, waiting for commendation or criticism.

Castiel looks up from Dean's hands – now curled loosely around the stock – and clears his throat, tilting his chin up authoritatively. "It'll do."

With a short huff of satisfaction, Dean skims a hand along the length of the forestock to check the safety one last time before passing it over. Castiel's eyes fall to the lazily slide of Dean's fingers over wood, something dry and uncomfortable thickening in his throat, and almost doesn't notice the way that their hands brush when he is given the rifle. Almost. There's still the electric burn sizzling all under his skin.

Castiel looks away to the soldiers in his platoon still left in line to be checked. "Next?"

29th April 1944

It's the last weekend before the regiment is moved out to Falmouth, and Companies Able, Baker and HQ have been allowed passes into the city. Despite the number of men being reduced drastically, the chaos on the journey over on the six o'clock train is just as bad – crammed into small carriages stinking of sweat and tobacco, chattering loudly, over-excited shouting and the first hurled insults for what promises to be resolved by a brawl later.

Castiel and Inias huddle together at the far back of the train, not having found seats this time, and cling to bars to desperately try and keep themselves upright as the train jolts and judders through the countryside. They discuss the imminent move west and what it will mean.

Castiel grimaces. "It means it's time to sharpen our bayonets."

Inias looks down his nose at Castiel, pulling into full-force his best impression of Captain Milton's disapproval. "Oh, but Lieutenant, your bayonet should already be sharpened," he says, his voice a disappointed whine. Then his expression flickers a little, his mockery breaking up as a smirk twists across his face. "Then again," he goes on, his voice dropping low, "you might enjoy stabbing someone with a blunt, uh, bayonet."

There is nothing Castiel can say in response to that. He looks disparagingly at Inias – in response to which, Inias just arches one comical eyebrow – and Castiel can only shake his head. "Shut the fuck up, Wallace," he says, even as he cracks into a reluctant smile.

"Oh, babe, I'll get you one day," Inias chides him, reaching up to pat his cheek fondly.

Castiel swats him away, retorting he'll do no such thing, and the train swings into the Plymouth railway station shortly afterwards. A bell rings and the men start to flow out of the carriages like a solid wave of bodies and noise. Inias and Castiel tag along at the end and set off on the now-familiar walk to the nearest pubs. The night is still early, the sky pale in its reds and purples, and the sound of evening vibrancy is already spilling out front doors with welcoming squares of the light inside.

They try a new pub this time, somewhere smaller, but it boasts a two-for-one offer on drinks and Glen Miller is playing inside, so it looks as good as anywhere else they've tried. They head in, weaving through the crowd gathered at the bar, and try to find a table. There's a small group of young men and women dancing in the far corner of the room, closest to the victrola – few enough that there shouldn't be any rowdy behaviour, but enough for Inias to dip his toes in the local water.

There is a loud uproar from the men standing at the bar, interspersed with laughter and drunken exclamations, and Inias looks over at Castiel. "Looks like we're the only sober men here, Cas," he says. He smiles, his face full of the sort of soft innocence that instantly wins over pretty girls and their stoic mothers, but Castiel knows the truth, the sly curve to it. "We'd better get to catching up."

Upon Inias' eager-faced insistence, Castiel reluctantly links arms with Inias and downs the first beer. They try a repeat with their second ones, but without great success; Castiel catches a glimpse of the scrunched-up expression of severe concentration on Inias' face and bursts out laughing, spraying beer everywhere.

They sip the dregs, buy one more and then settle. They light up cigarettes, one after another, and smoke spirals loosely up from their mouths as they talk.

The time is twenty-hundred-hours.

"—but that wasn't even how it happened," Inias is saying, his voice thick with alcohol as he speaks, "but you know Hester, the pressure gets to him and *bam* - he's all up in arms and thinking the only way to solve the problem is to scream himself hoarse, and there's no arguing with him once he starts." He heaves a sigh, and picks up his glass of beer to take a long sip. "Swear to god, that guy's gonna be the death of me."

"You may be more right than you think," Castiel answers. He's faring better than Inias for sobriety – still on his third glass to Inias' fourth, and taking it slowly. He raises his cigarette to his lips, takes a deep pull. The smoke ghosts over his lips as he continues. "Apparently he's going to be 2IC on the beach assault."

Inias' eyes widen over his glass. "No." He shakes his head vehemently. "He'll get us all killed. Over my dead body is he leading me anywhere."

"Over Milton's, more like," Castiel says.

"Yeah." Inias rolls his eyes and then gives a rueful smile. "I guess we'll just have to look after the Cap real carefully."

A short chuckle bursts out Castiel, because neither of them are particularly close to Captain Milton either, but at least Milton's competent. He mumbles an '*amen to that',* lifts his drink and takes another gulp. Inias needs no persuasion in taking a mouthful of agreement.

At that moment, there comes a distraction in the form of a loud, familiar voice drawling, "Evening, lieutenants" – and, without giving

any further warning, Dean swings around the table to drop down onto an available stool at their table.

"Good evening," Inias says pleasantly, and he lifts his glass in Dean's direction as a further greeting.

Castiel, on the other hand, just stares at him, waiting. Dean doesn't seem bothered in the slightest; he grins like he's the happiest guy alive and drums his fingertips on the table-top along with the music. Eventually, when Castiel realises that Dean is not going to go away on the force of prayers alone, he lifts his eyebrows and asks, "Can I help you?"

Dean looks over at Castiel, mouth falling slightly open as though offended. "What?" he says, sounding so hurt by the question that it can only be an act. "Aww, come on. Am I not allowed to come over and hang out with my two best buddies?"

Castiel blinks at him, slowly, like the sight before him is physically painful. "We're not your buddies," he says. "Now what do you want?"

Sighing heavily, Dean holds his hands up in defeat. "Alright, you caught me," he admits, and he overbalances on his stool, leaning over sideways so that his face is suddenly close enough to Castiel's that the smell of cheap soap and tobacco smoke can be caught warmly on his skin. Castiel sets his jaw stubbornly against the easy allure of it; Dean's languid smile stretches a little wider. "See, sir, I was wondering if I could maybe call in that drink you owe me?"

Castiel frowns. "I don't owe you a drink."

Dean leans back, clapping his hands together. "Sure you do," he exclaims, on the border of a laugh. "I bought you one last time."

Right. Castiel exhales through his teeth. “Winchester,” he says emphatically, as though he’s speaking to a very small child, “you bought me a drink because you knocked mine over. Remember?”

“Oh.” The grin slides from Dean’s face; his brow crumples as the memory comes back to him. “Yeah. Damn.” Then he’s back, all crinkly-eyed boyish charm, smiling with just the tip of his tongue stuck between his teeth. “Any chance you feel like buying me a drink anyway?”

“No.” A thought comes to Castiel, and he tilts in his stool to better face Dean head-on. “What’s wrong with your own money? You got your wages yesterday.”

Dean shrugs. “Sent ‘em back to my brother. I usually keep some for me, but he needs some new textbooks, so...”

Castiel sighs. “Christ.”

Swivelling in his stool to look Castiel dead in the eye, Dean grins. “C’mon, lieutenant. You’re Catholic, right?” he says persuasively, and if he notices the way Castiel tenses at the mention of his religion, he doesn’t take any heed to respecting it. He continues, “Don't you think God’d want you to be a good Samaritan? Help a fella out?”

Castiel fixes Dean with his most disparaging stare. “I think God would want you to be independent and quit scrounging off others,” he says flatly.

“*I* think God would consider us all equals,” Dean goes on, louder now and drowning out Castiel’s attempts at protest. He settles his elbows

on the edge of the table, arms folded over, and rocks forwards into Castiel's personal space. "Including poor people." His smile is two-parts challenging, one-part just plain dumb, and altogether an unsettling combination of arrogance and comfortable familiarity that sends shivers under Castiel's skin.

Forcibly tearing his eyes away from the pink line where Dean's teeth nudge at his bottom lip, Castiel heaves a heavy sigh. "Jesus. If I buy you a drink, will you go away?" he asks wearily.

Dean's smile stretches wider, warmer. He cocks his head to one side and winks. "Temporarily. Maybe."

Castiel squints at him. "Fine," he bites out, not sure if he has just won or lost this round.

"Thank you, sir," Dean says happily – the glee in his tone suggesting that Castiel probably lost – and then suddenly the music creaking out of victrola changes its tune and he sits bolt upright. "Aw, I love this song!" he exclaims, and in an instant he's scrambling off his stool in the direction of the open floor where he can pick off some poor young thing to dance with – but not before he reaches out for Castiel. "Oh," Dean says as an afterthought – his hand catches on the side of Castiel's arm, glides loosely over his shoulder blades, fingers tracing featherlight trenches over his shirt; barely touching him, but the sensation is still enough to raise goosebumps on the skin underneath. "And I'll have a beer!"

Inias bursts out laughing so hard his drink slops around dangerously in his glass, and when Castiel shoots him a deadly glare, he only exclaims, "What? I like him."

Great. Castiel rolls his eyes. He is now totally outnumbered with regards to the people who see Dean as the epitome of hilarity and

charm. He doesn't bother to answer that; he focuses instead on digging his pocket for his cigarette tin.

"C'mon, admit it – you like him too," Inias teases.

Castiel, still caught like an old record player on the bump and graze of Dean's fingers over his back, struggles to get enough purchase on a fingernail to pry the tin open. "Do not."

As Inias regards Castiel, something in his expression suddenly changes. The smile that lifts on his face is new and mischievous. He sets his glass of beer down. "Well, I'll be damned," he says, and he sits back in his chair as though struck by revelation. "You actually do. You *like* him."

"Huh?" Castiel is distracted by the sight, in the distance, of Dean's hand on the narrow waist of some young dark-haired girl, his fingers intertwined through hers as they hop and slide giddily across the floor. Castiel's fingernail finally finds the metal crease of his tin, and, already exerting more persuasive force than needed, the tin is flipped wildly open, the contents nearly scattering everywhere. He fumbles to snatch it back, and, once his cigarettes are safe, he shoots Inias a frown.

Inias tucks his tongue into the side of his mouth, shaking his head. "I don't believe this," he says, and he drops his voice low, leaning further across the table. "You're stuck on the Winchester kid."

Castiel recoils, his face scrunching up like it's the most ridiculous thing he's ever heard. "What?" he exclaims. "No. No way." He traps a cigarette between his lips and huffs an incredulous laugh around it. "I'm not stuck on anyone, Inias, and if I were, it sure as hell wouldn't be Dean fucking Winchester."

“You know, you could get into a lot of trouble for that.”

Not really thinking about the words coming out of his mouth or the meaning of them, Castiel says on a resigned exhalation of smoke, “Yeah, I know.”

“So you *are* stuck on him!” Inias concludes triumphantly, smirking. He rocks onto the back two legs of his stool. “I knew it.” Castiel gives him a withering look and doesn’t even dignify that with a response. Inias, however, is completely unfazed by Castiel’s silence. “Not that I blame you,” he continues. “He’s pretty handsome.”

“I’m not talking to you,” Castiel tells him bluntly.

“He’s got big hands, too.” Inias sips at his beer and makes eyes at Castiel over the rim of it, eyebrows quirking up. “You know what that means, huh?”

“*Jesus*, Inias—”

“Okay, okay…” Inias only smiles into his beer like he thinks he’s the funniest thing since the Marx Brothers, but he’s pretty drunk; Castiel just rolls his eyes again and settles for concentrating on his cigarette, in the hopes that perhaps if he smokes hard and fast enough, the tobacco smog will cover the anxious flush rising low on his neck.

He tries to stay focused, he really does – but Inias has fallen into a hush, content to sway from side to side with the brassy lull of the music as he drinks, and Castiel is offered no other distraction except to let his eyes fall again on Dean. The easy swing and rock of his hips. His narrow waist twisting, the girl’s hands on him surely able to feel

the pull and flex of muscle as he moves. His shoulders shifting with his steps, the green cotton of his dress shirt stretched taut. His ass – god, but he has a nice ass – and long, long legs. The warm, hungry shape of a grin on his lips when he looks at her; mouth soft, eyes sharp, intent clear. The way he looks at her, hot and fierce, like he's enjoying what he sees and he wants to know it better, wants to take it apart piece by piece and see what's underneath—

It's not too different from the way he looks at Castiel.

Jesus Christ. The bar is suddenly far too hot, too crowded, too claustrophobic, and Castiel can feel heat searing up under his skin, burning a flustered claim on his throat and cheeks. He's got to get outside; it's stuffy and he's feeling dizzy like his own legs might not even support him, and Dean Winchester is not a homosexual, but Castiel's never been more of the thought that he might be able to change his mind about that.

"Inias, I," Castiel starts, his voice low and rough as he starts collecting up his lighter and cigarette tin from the table to stash back into his pockets, "I'm going to – go outside. Just – I need some fresh air. I'll be back."

"Wait, what?" Inias looks up at him, a bewildered frown pulling down between his eyebrows. "Whoa – Cas. What's up?" He reaches across the table, snatches at Castiel's sleeve before he can disappear, and holds him fast. "You're not gonna throw up, are you?"

Castiel shakes his head. "No – look, I'm fine. I just need to get out of here for a second." He gently pries Inias' hands from his arm, pats one hand when he sets it back down on the table. "Swear to god, I'm fine. I'll be right back."

Seeming appeased by this, Inias nods – and then barely waits until

Castiel's back is turned before slyly finishing the remainder of his drink, so Castiel guesses he won't be too aggrieved by his absence. At worst, Inias can go find some girl to dance with.

Castiel pushes through the thick of people to get to the door and near-enough stumbles out onto the street when he finds it, much to the amusement of some middle-aged men clustered around the doorway. The chill night air on his skin is an instant relief; he just takes a second to breathe it in before reaching around to pull his folded garrison cap from his belt-loops and adjust it on his head, cigarette smouldering between his lips. He breathes and tries to think of other things. The hundreds of maps he's been studying for the assault. His physical training – sits-ups, press-ups, fast as he can punch them out – where are they going to do their five-mile run when they move out to Falmouth?

He sighs. He's going to miss this town. Baker Company have spent every weekend pass at their disposal on this place, emptying the pubs and sweetening the girls, and for a lot of men, in the last months, it's started to feel a little like home. The old buildings, tall and elegant in all their brickwork despite the chips and charcoal smears where German bombs landed too close; the straight-ruled tram-lines cutting through; the cluttered sky, all rain-clouds and industrial smog-darkness – it's comforting. He takes his cigarette from his mouth, exhales slowly. He wanders a little way down the sidewalk so that he's out of the way of the door, but not so far that he can't hear the music from inside, and leans back against the cool brickwork to smoke.

It could have been five minutes out there, or half an hour – Castiel isn't keeping track of the time – but his cigarette has long since burnt out to a blackened stub underneath his foot by the time he is eventually interrupted.

Dean swings out through the pub's front door, one hand on the wooden frame, just as drunk as he was when Castiel last saw him. He's grinning wide, his face lit up; his top button is undone. "Well," he says, drawing the word out long, slow and southern, "fancy seeing you out here, lieutenant."

Castiel arches his eyebrows at him. “Lieutenant Wallace told you, didn’t he?”

“Yes, sir,” Dean answers shamelessly, and he strides over to drop back against the brick wall beside Castiel. “He was worried. Did you throw up?”

“No!” Castiel sighs. “Jesus. No, I didn’t throw up. I’m okay.” He can feel his hands and ears coming up hot, and he hopes to hell that Dean won’t pursue the topic any further, because the real answeris floating tantalisingly around in his head. *I had to come outside because I was starting to feel faint watching you dance. Because I think I could turn you queer if I were given the chance.* He tries to push the thought away.

“So what, then?”

“None of your damn business, that’s what,” Castiel says, but he glances over at Dean on his left with no real resentment, lets him know he’s not actually angry.

Dean looks back at him, disappointed, creased brow and a mockery of a pout; however, he doesn’t push the question any further.

There’s a creaking scratch as the record on the victrola comes to its trumpet-fanfare conclusion, and then a long moment of a silence before the next one comes on. It’s Sinatra, and even from out here, Castiel can hear the squeals of girls from inside the bar. It’s a slow one - *dreamy,* even – and Castiel is just about to comment derisively when he notices Dean shifting excitedly.

Castiel eyes him with more than a trace of suspicion. “What?”

“Nothing, I just—” Dean grins, shrugging. “I just love this song.”

Eyebrows lifting incredulously, Castiel can only stare at him. “Are you kidding me?”

“What?” Dean says defensively. “You don’t like this song?”

“No, because I’m not a fucking bobby-soxer,” Castiel retorts, and he’s arguing, putting Dean down, but he likes the way Dean rears back up, that grin half-jaded, finger-pointing.

Pushing himself off the wall by the shoulders, hips-first and the rest of his body following after, Dean wheels around to stand in front of Castiel. “Hey,” he says, voice low like he’s trying to pretend he’s pissed off, but he’s smiling too wide for that. “Don’t be rude. Sinatra’s good.”

There’s a flashfire-rush in Castiel’s veins, and he’s still more than a little drunk, so he ignores the dizzy flush under his skin and challenges, “Yeah, if you’re a fairy, maybe.” He’s still leaning back against the wall, one foot tucked behind the other and both propped out in front of him, his hips a lazy diagonal to the sidewalk.

Dean lets out a laugh . “C’mon, seriously? This doesn’t make you wanna dance even a little?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Bullshit.”

Castiel lifts his eyes heavenwards as if seeking help, his brow screwing up in disbelief, but it's with amusement that he comes back to ask, "Why are you so desperate to dance with me?"

"I don't want to dance with you—"

"Then stop asking me if I know how," Castiel says, raising his eyebrows pointedly.

Dean drags a hand over his mouth, still chuckling to himself. "That ain't why I'm asking you – Jesus." He shakes his head but he's smiling broad as ever.

Castiel tilts his head to the side, almost enjoying this. "Really? But then, what if I told you I *could* dance?" he asks, and he pushes himself up off the wall – swaying unexpectedly close to Dean as his body catches up to his feet, less than a yard from Dean's. Castiel can hear his heartbeat thundering in his ears, his sight alcohol-blurred at the edges, but the thrill is in the way Dean's eyes crease with laughter at the corners, fall to flicker over Castiel's face like he's memorising every inch. Castiel tips his chin up defiantly. "What then?"

"I'd say prove it." Dean is arrogant, self-assured, teeth flashing in the lamplight. Castiel decides to knock him down a peg.

Without further ado, except maybe for the emboldened look he throws Dean, he spreads his arms wide for balance, waits for the lull in the music to anticipate the crescendo... and then he knocks out the best few steps he can remember from embarrassing high school dances – an easy, boring, one-two-three-one-two-three waltz, and then, just to fuck with him, a swinging Charleston step he remembers his mother doing with her friends in the kitchen when he was young – but that

sort of thing was never his forte, and he trips.

Dean laughs out loud, head thrown backwards and whole body arching. Thankfully, though, he's not so busy making fun of Castiel that he can't reach out a hand to steady him, fingers curling capably around Castiel's upper arm.

For a few seconds, Dean is too busy laughing to say anything, but as Castiel straightens up and attempts to fight down the flush of embarrassment in his cheeks, he says, "Well, damn, sir, but you're pretty good."

Castiel throws his head back as if it was all intentional, and he meets Dean's gaze unabashed. "Sergeant, you flatter me," he says, and nothing can pin back the smallest curve of a smile on his lips.

Dean's mouth twists slyly. "Well, someone has to."

Castiel guesses he walked right into that one. He shakes his head. "Winchester, have I ever told you that you're a pain in my ass?"

"Every day, sir." Dean's lopsided smirk breaks out into a full-grin. He rocks back on his heels, and it's only when he rocks back forwards that Castiel realises they are still standing close enough together to breathe the same air, Dean's hand still curved around Castiel's bicep. At this distance, Castiel can pick out the details; the small cluster of freckles to one side of his nose, especially dense so that they merge together; the crisp corner of his garrison cap, sitting arrogantly low on his brow; the colour of his eyes in the lamplight.

Castiel swallows, the sound a dull click in the absence of words between them, and - even though just the thought of it seems impossible, even though his every inch aches to be nearer still - he

steps back from Dean. Loose fingers fall from Castiel's arm, but if they flex at Dean's side like they're faced with an unsettling emptiness now, then Castiel very determinedly does not notice.

"So," he starts, ignoring the nervous way his voice creaks a little at the edges, "it's coming up to twenty-one-hundred about now, and we're going to have to head back soon. You still thirsty for that drink?"

"Oh, hell yes," Dean says, clapping his hands together enthusiastically, and wastes no time in following Castiel back into bar for one last drink.

As they weave back through the crowd to reach the bar, Dean reaches out and rests the tips of his fingers on the middle of Castiel's back, but it's to keep from losing him in the midst of all the people. Castiel doesn't feel his cheeks burn hot at the light and easy pressure of it. He doesn't feel a shiver trace its path up his spine from the place where they touch. He certainly doesn't glance back over his shoulder as he walks to meet Dean's eyes, reassure himself that he's still there, wordlessly echo the near-invisible dip and quirk of his smile.

He doesn't.

But if he does, it's only to make sure that the insistent press of Dean's hand is without any real intent – because that would be unprofessional.

May 3rd 1944

Baker Company packs up its bags – weapons and all – and climbs aboard trains and trucks for the journey west for Falmouth. They're moving out.

Chapter 2: Falmouth

6th May 1944

Dear Sam,

Still no news of when we're heading out to France, unfortunately, but we're billeted now in a bigger port town to accommodate the Force O ships, so my guess is it can't be too far off. By this stage, I just want to get the damn thing over with – I'm tired of waiting forever. Me and the other guys, Joe and Benny, we're so bored we actually started practicing our marching orders – and we've only been here three days. Everyone's going crazy, I tell you. Not to mention that lieutenant – I told you about Novak, right? I can tell he's sick and tired just looking at me, but I swear I'm not trying to piss him off. It just kind of happens. He's put me on latrine duty twice already, and like I said, it's only day three. I figure he's doing his job, though... piss-pans need cleaning, after all, and I'm just enough of an asshole to attract his attention, so that's the way it goes. Although it's hard to miss his attention. He's the most damns serious guy I've ever met, always notices everything. Adam tried to get some booze into town as well, courtesy of Slapton corner store, but it seems like being First Sergeant doesn't get you any fancy privileges as long as Novak's in the mood for following rules. I reckon I can get him to break them, though. Give me time.

Anyway, it's good to hear you're doing okay. Don't worry about asshats giving you trouble, alright? It's only early, some kids might still be enlistment rejects trying to play it tough. They might settle down. Hell, they might even be good guys. Give everybody a chance – they deserve at least that. Don't go getting in any fights, you hear me? I'm not going to be able to haul your ass out of trouble. At least your prof's nice, although you were always going to be the teacher's pet. I don't know – maybe try not being so goddamn smart! And I'm sure she doesn't... Just don't talk too much about your history of language stuff to her. Yet.

I should be able to write pretty regularly while I'm here, anyway. I'll talk you again soon, okay? Look after yourself. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

May 9th 1944

It's a nice enough place, all things considered, but the time that Baker Company spends in Falmouth is easily the most boring month they've ever had to endure. At this stage, their training is over and now there is nothing to do but wait for their superiors to make a decision about when the operation will be launched; there is a lot of free time and very little to be done to occupy it.

Battalion S-1 Major Singer sets up theatres inside wall tents, offering free candy and popcorn to go with the movies rolling non-stop; a tent is set up as a library but stock moves fast and by the time Castiel gets there, most of the good books are already gone. He picks up whatever's left and reads it anyway, one book a week. Sports equipment is distributed and the men get competitive; Andy Gallagher insists with a grin that he walked into a door, but the black eye he's carrying looks distinctively fist-shaped.

Captain Milton rounds up the lieutenants one day to issue new equipment: new uniform, designed to withstand poisonous gas attacks, and clearly not designed for comfort either. The material is clammy, cold, and sticky, and every man makes a face when his new pressed-and-folded uniform is dropped into his arms, but they know better than to comment.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for when the lieutenants are called upon to distribute condoms.

"Well, sir, who'd have thought?" Sergeant Barnes bursts out cackling as he snatches his string of condoms out of the box that Castiel holds out. "Gotta be honest, I never thought you were that interested in my sex life—"

"They're for waterproofing," Castiel says wearily, what he knows will be the first time of many, but he is easily drowned out by word being passed on back down the line.

"What – what's going on—"

"Novak's got a sex-life?!"

"No, asshole, there's condoms at the—"

"They're givin' us *condoms*?!"

The uninterested orderliness of the queue breaks down as they push towards the front, laughing amongst themselves and eagerly peering past one other to see what's happening at the front.

"They're for *waterproofing*," Castiel repeats, raising his voice. "You can use them to keep your possessions dry during the assault – it'd also be a good idea to put them over the muzzle of your rifle to keep the water—"

“Oh, don’t you worry, lieutenant, I’ll be putting it on the end of my rifle alright,” Private Fitzgerald says slyly as he grabs a handful.

“Like hell you will—”

“Shut the fuck up, Garth, your *rifle* ain’t even loaded—”

“Your momma sure didn’t complain!”

A juvenile chorus of *oooooohhhh* rings out, someone near the back of the line cheering encouragement for a full fight to break out, but thankfully Inias, at Castiel’s side with another box, comes in with a distraction, commenting, “Well, will you look at that – with all that sexual tension, you’ll be glad of those rubbers.”

Fitzgerald scoffs, and Private Miller, whom he was insulting, flushes faintly and snaps, “Hey, I ain’t a faggot, alright?”, but at least they’re not threatening to break out into a fist-fight anymore. Inias glances quickly over at Castiel, probably worried that he’s offended, but Castiel plays oblivious. He hands out condoms to the rest of the line, reciting *‘for waterproofing – no, it’s for waterproofing’* like a mantra as he does so, before collecting some for himself.

“Yeah, make sure you get plenty of your own, sir!” Dean suddenly shouts as Castiel is stashing his condoms into the pockets of his combat jacket, making Castiel startle to the extent that he drops half of them.

He stoops to retrieve the fallen condoms, and scowls in Dean’s direction as he straightens back up, but Dean is already sauntering away – *sauntering* - and laughing about something with Corporal Harvelle, head tipped back, whole body curving. He recovers, shaking his head, and before he rounds the corner of one of the sausage-billets,

Castiel sees him amusedly flipping through his collection of condoms like a pack of cards. His fingers are easy, deft, on the plastic.

Castiel flat-packs the now-empty cardboard box with more force than is probably required, punching hard, and finds his own words churning in his head. *They're for waterproofing.*

They are given new weapons and spend extensive periods of time on the ranges, zeroing their sights, getting used to the changes, and, in Corporal Lowell's case, bitching at length about how many modifications he'd made to his old rifle only to have it taken away from him. They get fancy escape-aids in a little tin – a metal file to hang inside their jacket, a button for the new combat pants with a compass built in, a silk scarf patterned with a map of Normandy, and a shitload of francs to spend. Not many of those francs will ever make it to France in the pockets of the original owner, Castiel suspects; he sees the men playing cards and throwing the coins around every night for a week, metal clinking in their hands. They keep suspiciously good care of the condoms, though.

May 12th 1944

New and interesting company is found in the men of the other 29th infantry regiments, now all pooled together in one giant space. A couple of the regiments have already been touring in North Africa and don't respond kindly to the as-of-yet battle virgins of the 116th, flouncing around the billets and acting like they're hard shit. Castiel's getting tired of picking Staff Sergeant Milligan and Corporal Harvelle out of fights, and the bruises he's sporting after accidentally ending up in the middle of one still hurts.

For the most part, Castiel gets on well with the African veterans; he's

interested in what they have to say, about their experiences and about combat in general.

“What advice have I got?” one of them laughs when Castiel asks, and looks him up and down appraisingly. “Kid, advice ain’t gonna do jack shit for you.”

“Don’t get shot,” another one chimes in unhelpfully, which they all seem to find hilarious.

“Nah, that’s bullshit – you’re gonna get shot. Hell, I don’t know a guy in my company who ain’t been shot.” The first soldier tuts thoughtfully, mouth twisting. “Let’s see... make decisions fast – dumb decisions are better’n no decisions, else all that time you’re sitting around plotting a plan to shame Clausevitz, the other guys’ll be getting their moves in – and make sure you trust your NCOs. They’re the ones running the show.”

“Yeah, you like to think so,” says the second one with a snort of laughter. Both of them are non-commissioned officers themselves, but Castiel knows they’re telling the truth and not just boasting of their own skills.

“Okay,” Castiel says, nodding. He has an itch like he wants to write all this down, but the veterans are already teasing him enough as it is for his questions alone.

“Oh, and here’s something – guys always freak out at first about mortars coming in, but you’ll get used to working out where they’re gonna land. In general, the rule is that if you can hear the shell, you’re fine.” The soldier levels a finger at Castiel, his eyebrow cocked like a warning. “You’re fucked when you can’t hear the shell. “

Castiel hesitates. “Alright.” It’s intimidating, but he’s glad to have found these things out now.

He’s got another question, but as he opens his mouth, he notices Captain Milton standing in the far corner of the mess hall. He and the Baker executive officer, First Lieutenant Shurley, are deep in conversation, but they are watching Castiel. It’s unsettling. Castiel feels a shiver climb the knobs of his spine, one by one and slow like something terrible is going to happen.

At last Captain Milton looks away, speaking to Lieutenant Shurley more urgently now, his mouth moving almost imperceptibly, and then they’re gone.

Castiel turns back to the veterans, apologising for getting distracted, but he has forgotten his question.

May 17th 1944

The mess hall is always crowded at exactly nineteen-hundred-hours, when the doors first open and all the men, enlisted and officer alike, who have been queued up a half-mile back from the building flood in to get their fill. Castiel usually avoids it as this time, but the platoon leaders of Baker Company have a briefing with Major Singer at twenty-hundred-hours and so he has little choice but to line up with everybody else. He has Inias with him, but he still isn’t looking forwards to trying to cram himself into a very small space with every other goddamn soldier in the encampment.

Inias and Castiel shuffle through the doors at a painfully slow pace – it takes them at least three minutes just to get from one side of the

threshold to the other so that they can remove their garrison caps – and by that time, the mess hall is stuffed full to throbbing. Noise hits them as a wall, but they push through with thoughts of a hot dinner giving them fresh strength,

Castiel gets served first and moves out towards the officers' mess to find a place for him and Inias to sit, but even as he treads the familiar path over to the low dividing wall between one section of the hall and another, he realises that every table is full. The hungry officers who were first to get in have filled every available seat and then some; they are crowded along the sides of each table, clustered around the corners, and there are even two guys from the 115th sharing a seat. The idea of finding somewhere to sit down is ambitious, to say the least.

Suddenly finding himself in that awkward situation of standing in the middle of the mess hall with nowhere to sit, Castiel begins scanning the tables of the enlisted men for someone from Baker Company. After a moment or two he spies a handful of men from his platoon, with a few spaces left on their table, and he heads in that direction.

As he approaches, Private Gallagher notices him, and looks up in surprise. "Everything alright, sir?" he asks, and with that, everyone else's attention is caught, and Castiel finds all eyes upon him, standing at the end of their table with his tray balanced precariously in his hands.

Castiel clears his throat, eyes flickering over the soldiers at the table – Andy Gallagher, Kevin Tran, Benny Lafitte, Joe Harvelle, Dean Winchester, Charlie Bradbury – it'll do. "Is it alright if I sit here?"

The men exchange glances, taken aback by this turn of events, but shrug. "Yeah, of course." They shuffle down the benches to let him sit down, and then further still when they notice Inias following a few paces behind Castiel.

Inias pauses at the head of the table, frowning slightly. “Officers’ mess full again?” he asks Castiel, looking back over his shoulder at the other side of the room, where there is no sign of a seat ever being relinquished to new-comers.

“Yeah.” Castiel shunts further down the bench to allow Inias to sit down beside him.

“Aw, don’t worry, lieutenants, we’ll be your friends,” Corporal Harvelle says cheerily, waving a potato on the end of his fork.

“Yeah, you’ve always got us,” Bradbury chimes in with a smile.

“Thank you.” Inias, ever the gentleman, smiles and looks around the table. “How are you all doing?”

The men answer as a cacophony of voices, all *just fine, sir* and *got a hell of a blister on my toe but I’m doin’ okay*, with which Inias seems satisfied, and leads off further into what they’ve been doing today, since there’s not a hell of a lot to do in Falmouth and every day is a new exercise in creatively finding ways to occupy yourself. There’s an inter-company soccer tournament coming up, which most of them having been practicing for, with the exception of Lance Corporal Lafitte, who is more a basketball kind of guy, and Gallagher, who holds up his hands in surrender and admits to having terrible coordination.

“Well, luckily for us, you’re not going to be kicking balls at the Krauts,” Bradbury says.

“I don’t know,” says Tran thoughtfully, “drop-kicking a grenade at

them could be fun."

"You fucking kidding me? Do that and you'll blow off your goddamn leg," replies Harvelle incredulously, and he jerks his head in Dean's direction. "Even the fearless Doc here couldn't work his magic fingers on you, then."

Following the conversation even while not contributing a great deal, Castiel's eyes move from Harvelle to Dean, and is startled to see that Dean is not particularly engaged in the topic either; instead, he is staring straight at Castiel, eyebrows pulled together in the middle like he's thinking hard about something. Distantly, Castiel hears someone made a lewd joke about *magic fingers*, but he isn't sure what it was or who said it.

Unexpectedly then, Dean tilts his head back, as though trying to encourage his food to digest faster in his mouth before he speaks, and, without any warning or prompt, says, "Lieutenant Novak, what's your first name?"

The rest of the conversation on the table grinds to a halt as everyone tunes into what's happening between Dean and Castiel. Harvelle throws Castiel a grin and intervenes, teasing, "His first name's *sir*."

Castiel's mouth twists into a small smile. "Yeah," he says, nodding in Harvelle's direction. "He's got it right."

"Nah, come on, sir." Dean's lower lip juts out into an overly melodramatic pout. "Please?"

"No."

Amidst the cackles of laughter and cajoling of *nice try, asshat,* from the other men at the table, Dean sits back seemingly defeated. However, after only a moment or two of idly stirring his meat around his plate with the edge of his knife, he looks back up. “It’s Cassteel, isn’t it?”

Castiel’s eyes flick up to meet Dean’s, apprehensive. He weighs up the expression in Dean’s eyes, which seems genuine enough – just plain curious – and considers whether he should tell him off for inappropriate conduct or not. In the end, he settles for saying, “You seem very well-informed.”

Dean grins. "I'm good like that.”

Castiel lifts his eyebrows but doesn’t answer. Before he can even think to speak, Lafitte intervenes with a laugh. “Aw, sir, don’t tear him a new one yet,” he says. “We kinda like him. ‘Sides, we’ve all seen your badges here. On registers and that.”

“Except it’s Cast-*iel*,” Inias tells them, leaning forwards to peek past Castiel at the rest of the men down at the other end of the table.

With a resigned noise of surrender, Castiel shrugs, but he does elbow Inias in the stomach. “I honestly don’t know how I maintain any semblance of authority with you around,” he says.

Inias smiles sheepishly, but he bumps Castiel with his shoulder – nearly scattering Castiel’s forkful of food all over the table in the process. “Hey, don’t be sour, babe,” he says. “You love me really.”

“You’re terrible,” Castiel retorts. He holds his fork carefully out of reach of Inias’ antics, looking over disapprovingly at him.

Funnily enough, Inias doesn't argue with this; he just stifles a laugh into the back of his hand.

It seems Dean isn't done with the personal interrogations, as the next thing Castiel knows, he's setting down his fork and tilting his head past Private Gallagher to meet Castiel's eyes. "So how come he gets to call you *babe* and I don't get to call you *sweetheart,* anyway?" he complains, and if he notices that the rest of the table lapses off into giggles and wolf-whistles, he doesn't show it. He's looking intently across at Castiel, ignoring everything else; there's that dumb lopsided start of a smile, arrogant on his lips, but he looks serious. Castiel wonders why it matters to him.

"He doesn't," Castiel starts. He glances over at Inias, who looks quietly pleased with himself – of course – and then back to Dean. "But on the grounds that he moved into the house across the road from mine in the first grade, sat in front of me in every class from that point on so that he could help me on every chemistry test they could throw at us, held my head out of the toilet while I puked at our highschool, and has kind of been metaphorically holding my head out of toilets ever since... I figure he's allowed to get away with it."

No-one reacts to this story; they're all Bedford-born-and-bred and have heard it a thousand times. Bradbury asks someone to pass him the jug of the water.

Inias, at Castiel's side, shakes his head, smiling. "Swear to god, Novak," he teases, "every time you tell that story you sound a little more sweet on me."

"You're such an asshole."

Inias laughs.

“So I guess you go pretty far back,” Dean says at last.

Inias shrugs his shoulders. “To be honest, most of the guys here go pretty far back. We’ve got, what is it, thirty guys in Baker coming from Bedford? Forty?” He looks across at Castiel, frowning as he tries to remember the exact statistic.

“I think it was thirty-seven last time I heard,” Gallagher offers. “Except Rowan transferred to the 47th, didn’t he – so I guess that’s thirty-six.”

Castiel nods. “Yeah, thirty-six.”

Dean’s mouth has fallen slightly open. He looks incredulously between the three of them. “You serious?”

“Absolutely.” Inias stuffs a forkful of beef into his mouth, and then presses a fingertip to the bow of his lips as he waits to chew and swallow before continuing. “Uh – yeah, I know of six guys who went to our high school, even – although I think we’d graduated by the time they got there.”

“No, Zeddmore was a freshman in our last year,” Castiel corrects absently, reaching for his glass of water.

“That is so weird.” Dean sits back heavily on the bench, staring around at them all. “Geez. You’re all practically inbred.”

Castiel gives him a stern look. He can just about tolerate Dean being

nosey – almost all new recruits are – but there's no need to be just plain rude. He can already feel irritation starting to itch under his skin; he doesn't bother trying to sugar-coat it, either. "Well, I'm pretty sure you just found the single fastest way to insult most of the men in the company, but yeah, you could say that."

Dean lets out a short, disbelieving huff of a laugh. "What, you don't think it's weird?"

Private Tran grimaces and leans forwards to whisper conspiratorially, "A little, yeah."

"What's weird about it?" Castiel asks. "It's a sizable town. We never knew each other before we signed up, except a few – me and Lieutenant Wallace, for example – but for the most part we never crossed paths until we signed up or got enlisted."

"Yeah, but... the same damn town." Dean shakes his head. "I mean, come on. You probably all went to the same stores, hung out at all the same places, and never even knew. Hell, you probably all slept with the same broads!" He points a finger and levels it around at all of them, one person at a time. "You know, if she had anything, you're all fucked."

Castiel shoots his most disparaging look in Dean's direction. "Thank you for your concern, but I think we're safe."

Dean's mouth falls into a cocky grin, the tip of his tongue just visible between his teeth. He folds his arms across his chest. "Well, yeah, you'll be fine," he says smugly. "You probably never had a flop with anybody, huh?"

There is the clear thud of someone kicking Dean under the table.

Whoever it was, Castiel appreciates their effort in trying to get Dean to grow the fuck up and stop being such an arrogant asshole, but clearly some people are lost causes entirely, as Dean just twists out of their reach and chuckles, "*What*? I'm just messing around", completely unashamed of his actions.

Regardless of whether or not Dean is *just messing around,* Castiel can already feel blood beating loud in his skull like a warning with every passing second. He doesn't break eye contact with him, his expression hard. "That's none of your business, Winchester."

With a snort of laughter, Dean only says, "I'll take that as confirmation, then."

Castiel's hands tighten on his cutlery. He looks down at his plate – he's not hungry anymore.

He finds himself thinking, strangely enough, of that last night of their stay in Slapton, when they'd all headed up to Plymouth to drink and generally make merry – when he and Dean had managed to converse perfectly civilly for most of the evening, easy as anything. He'd made the mistake of therefore thinking that the brusque, disrespectful asshole he'd first encountered had disappeared. Clearly, however, he was wrong.

"Winchester," Inias says sharply – a tone of voice Castiel hasn't heard on him in years. "I suggest you shut up."

Dean tilts forwards to get closer, still grinning like he thinks he's the funniest person alive, and looks across to Inias. "Why, is he saving himself for you?"

Corporal Harvelle shoves at him. "Man, just shut the fuck up."

Castiel sets down his cutlery, very slowly, metal clinking against the tray. “Winchester,” he says quietly, his eyes lifting to meet Dean’s once more. “Do you remember when I told you were in my platoon walking a very thin line?” He stares Dean down, jaw pulled taut, and almost dares Dean to make some smartass comment. “Well, right about now you’re just about holding onto it by your goddamn teeth.”

And then Dean arches his eyebrows, grin wide, lips slightly parted. “Is that what you told the broad you didn’t sleep with?”

For the longest time, the table sits in total silence, perversely at odds with the bustle of the rest of the mess hall around them. Castiel doesn’t flinch. He doesn’t even blink.

Then: “Get out.”

Dean looks straight back at him, uncomprehending. After a moment or two, his eyebrows pull together in the middle. He sits in absolute silence for a moment, just scrutinising Castiel as though to try to and gauge whether he’s serious. “What?”

Castiel has not moved an inch. He just looks at Dean, perfectly calm. “Get out.”

For one heart-stopping second, it looks like Dean is going to argue – and Castiel doesn’t know what he would have done then, except report him to Captain Milton, but that always looks bad – but then Dean lets out a short huff of air, defeated. He looks down at his dinner, still unfinished, but makes no comment. Then he looks back up, meeting Castiel’s eyes once more, and says, “Yes, sir.” And without further ado, he stands up, picks up his tray, and leaves.

No-one speaks. This is why officers and enlisted men don't eat together – too much leeway for inappropriate conduct, although Dean's behaviour just blew straight through *inappropriate* and out the other side. Now everything is somewhat unsettled. Gallagher becomes intensely interested in his meal, scooping up enormous, quivering fork-loads at a time; Bradbury points out a smear of gravy to the side of Corporal Harvelle's mouth, which Harvelle responds to with a facetiously-seductive attempt to lick it off; Private Tran lets out a long exhalation and awkwardly says, "So, these potatoes, huh?"

Castiel lets out a long breath, and, feeling bad for the enlisted men whose dinner he's now ruined, apologises. They all immediately open their mouths to tell him it's not his fault, that Winchester just never knows when to quit, and the hush that they lapse back into after their declarations have been made is thick still, but less uncomfortable. They continue eating in contented silence until it is broken once more, this time by Corporal Harvelle giving a low whistle.

"Shit," he says, twisting in his seat to jerk his head in the direction of the dinner queue. "Will you look at that?"

Everyone lifts their heads to follow his gaze and immediately spot what he's commenting on. Part of one of the coloured infantry regiments has filed in to get their food and they are lined neatly against the far wall to wait, making conversation amongst themselves and pointedly ignoring the fact that the mess hall has grown quiet and that most of the white soldiers are staring at them.

"Christ."

"Are they even allowed in here?"

Gallagher is the first to look away, grimacing. "Damn – soon they'll be letting in fags and everything."

Castiel's eyes flicker slowly over the men in the distance before returning to his dinner.

"Fuck that – they can fight their own goddamn war."

His meat has gone cold by this stage, and he's lost his appetite anyway after that argument with Dean. There is still a low beat of anger under his skin and ringing in the back of his skull. He doesn't even try to contribute to this new conversation.

"I'll be damned, but you all kind of sound like this guy I've been hearing of," Inias suddenly says, his voice soft, but the other fall quiet to hear him. He looks up at the ceiling with a pensiveness so intense it can only be feigned, tapping the tines of his fork against his plate. "Ah, what was he called – you know, about yea high—" he gestures with his fork, levels a line from the side of his head "—bad moustache, troops all lined up to meet us on the other side of that Channel?"

The men catch on to what Inias is saying all at once, starting to groan and complain in unison – *but sir – no, we just – come on, you know we – do you really - only kidding – think they should be allowed?*

Inias nods along with them for a second before raising a hand to shush them. "See, I don't know about you, but I was always under the impression we were fighting for freedom."

"I thought we were fighting 'cause Mr. Hitler invaded Poland," Benny Lafitte cuts in sarcastically.

Private Bradbury rolls his eyes. "Then why isn't that Poland's

problem?”

“Well, they need the greatest country in the world to babysit them, of course.”

“Then again, who can blame ‘em?”

“*I* blame them,” Tran says sourly. “I could be at home right now.”

There is laughter and a general mockery of Tran’s resentment of having being drafted, and Castiel is only half-listening as he stirs the last of his food around and around his plate, drawing shapes and patterns in the leftover sauce. Then there is an elbow abruptly disrupting him, and he jumps. “What?”

“I said, what do you think, sir?” Harvelle asks him.

Castiel blinks, trying to focus on the conversation in front of him. “About what?”

Harvelle stares at him for a second before glancing back to the others with a frown. “Uh,” he says uncertainly. “I don’t know - about all of it?”

“Yeah, sure.” Castiel nods distractedly, looking away towards the clock on the far wall of the mess. It’s nineteen-thirty-five. He has twenty-five minutes to be in Major Singer’s office, and he has to get back to his billet first to collect the necessary material for it as well. “I’m sorry, will you excuse me?”

Looking somewhat confused, the others agree, and so, with one last glance around at them all to thank them for letting him sit there, he collects up his tray and leaves. Dean Winchester is standing outside of the mess hall doors, an unlit cigarette clenched in his teeth. Castiel doesn't even look at him.

May 21st 1944

The promise of all the newest US movie releases being sent straight over to the makeshift movie theatres set up in Falmouth sours quickly when the men realise that there actually aren't that many movies being made at the moment. What little new movies are made are on almost constant repeat until most of Baker Company can recite *Going My Way* and *Gaslight* word-for-word. Sometimes older ones come on though, classic dance movies between the propaganda reels.

Castiel doesn't care for dance but *Swing Time* is showing and it's something to do. There's nothing left in the billets' library that he hasn't yet read, and in the theatre there's bound to be someone else bored out of their skulls who he can talk to, even if he doesn't actually enjoy the movie. In itself, it's not too bad. There are ear-piercing wolf whistles every time Ginger Rogers drifts onto the screen, and Castiel pretends to be interested. He forces a laugh when someone yells out something crude from the front row, nods approvingly when Ginger twirls in a long glitzy dress, her slim legs silhouetted through the material; he plays the part.

Fred Astaire is goofing about in someone's living room – Castiel doesn't know whose, but then again, he's not really paying attention – and Castiel glances over the men sitting nearby him, trying to work out if any of them are as mind-numbingly bored as he is. On his right side is Inias, who loves dancing movies and will hush him fiercely if he tries to interrupt; on his left side are some of the privates from Lieutenant's Hester's platoon. There's a handful of men that he doesn't

recognise sitting directly in front of him, and then, just to the far left of their group, is Corporal Harvelle, and then, beyond him, there is Dean Winchester.

Castiel's eyes snap back to the front immediately.

Onscreen, Ginger Rogers is bending over the bathroom sink, rubbing soap suds into her hair and piling it all up atop her head. "*Lucky?*" Her voice is high and shrill. "*Lucky!*"

Fred Astaire sits down at the piano.

Castiel is still annoyed at Dean. Just the memory of their disagreement in the mess hall starts irritation flaring up inside Castiel anew, and his jaw tightens subconsciously. Honestly, he's getting sick and tired of Dean's behaviour, and he is completely of the belief that his life would be one hundred times better and one thousand times easier if Dean were no longer in it.

He doesn't want anything to do with him.

Castiel lasts about three more seconds before he lets his gaze drift back to forbidden territory.

Dean's engrossed in the movie, lips subconsciously half-parted as he watches. The flickering white of the movie screen lights up his face with a pale glow – the soft curl of his eyelashes, the striking line of his nose – and casts shadows everywhere else – the hollows of his cheeks, the hinge of his jaw – and then Dean swallows. Castiel is going to look away, he's going to return to the film, but his eyes are falling unwillingly to the smooth line of his throat, the sleek pull of muscles under the skin with the bob of his Adam's apple. His jacket is off, draped carelessly over the back of his seat; his shirt collar is perfectly

creased against his neck, the rest of the material starched and ironed to the highest standard so that it stretches taut over his shoulders and back like a second skin, and it's not too hard to imagine him without it.

Shit. Castiel looks away.

Fred Astaire is getting into the swing of the song now, and Castiel tries to pay attention. His mouth has suddenly come up dry. He narrows his eyes at the screen, forcing himself to focus on the music rather than anything irresponsible like the steady thrum of heat under his skin or the way Dean Winchester would look out of that dress uniform.

A much-needed distraction comes with the realisation that one of the privates to Castiel's left is singing along under his breath, albeit tunelessly, and Castiel lets the off-key accompaniment serve as a reminder that the music is still playing, the movie's still rolling, and he's not to look the other way, no matter how tempted he may be. He stares straight ahead and digs his fingers into his knees until his knuckles turn white. It's definite, then: Dean Winchester is the worst thing ever to have happened to him.

May 29th 1944

On a Monday, Baker Company go down to the ranges two platoons at a time to practice their marksmanship, for lack of anything better to do. Castiel rounds up one-platoon to collect their weapons from the armoury and stands idly by the entrance making conversation with Lieutenant Hester as their men file back out.

"—but you know, I don't actually think it'll be too bad," Hester is saying of the Normandy beach attack, confident, but there is an

uncertain twitch to his fingers on the cheek piece of his rifle. “I mean, we’ve practiced it a hundred times and it’s always turned out okay – with the exception of that Tiger exercise, of course, but that was just poor execution—”

“I hate to say this, but the quality of the execution won’t necessarily be up to you,” Castiel says grimly, eyeing the troops going past as he speaks. “Not to mention – Corbett! It’s a *sight*, not a *handle* – that all of our practice runs have been in England.”

Sergeant Milligan pauses in front of the two lieutenants. “Last man, sir.”

Castiel nods. “Thank you.”

Milligan heads off to form up the rest of the platoons. Hester turns to Castiel and claps him firmly on the shoulder, his hand a clammy and patronising weight, and exclaims, “Don’t worry, Novak. You just sit tight and let me and the Cap sort it out,” before sliding away. His voice is high, his laughter shrill. Castiel frowns.

They head out for the ranges in column, officers off to the side where they can give marching orders and ensure that everyone’s behaving themselves. By this stage, with the date of Operation Neptune as of yet unannounced by imminent, they should all be pitch-perfect. Some talk quietly amongst themselves within the ranks, but are quickly told to shut up and face the front. Weapons crossed over their chests, they’re all in step, easy as breathing.

Separating into their squads and then again into teams of similar weapons, they wait their turn or take up their place at the firing-point, prone on the gravel and waiting for further instruction. Castiel’s rifle team is up first; he lies at the far end of the point, M1 tucked into the hollow of his shoulder.

Hester's voice makes him jump, seeming to come from right behind his ear. "With a clip of eight rounds, *load* – make ready – and, in your own time, to the targets in front, fire."

Castiel's drills are fluid, practiced – safety, bolt back, clip in, *click*, and lift - and he squeezes off his shots easy, braced for the recoil to slam the rifle butt back into his shoulder. He empties his clip, clicks the safety back on, and waits. The others are still shooting.

Then, as Hester calls out to check firstly that everyone has spent all their ammunition, and then to command that they all make safe, to Castiel's right, Private Blake's finger slips past the trigger guard, and with the safety catch unapplied, lets off one more echoing shot into the silence.

Castiel glances over, alarmed, and catches Blake's eye as he looks up in absolute horror to see how much trouble he's in, and for a long second, he and Blake simply stare at each other in an unspoken agreement of *you're a fucking idiot.*

However, Castiel was not expecting the sheer intensity of Hester's explosion - he's strung far too tight with the pressure of keeping up good impressions as second-in-command, not letting anyone down, proving he's good enough, and he just snaps.

"Who was that?" he's yelling – not even a drill-sergeant parade-square-order yell, but flat-out screaming so that his voice cracks. "Who the *fuck* was that?"

Castiel stares straight ahead, not giving away any hint that he knows who it is; out of the corner of his eye, he can see Blake cringing and buoying himself up to admit the fault – but he doesn't even get a

chance, because Hester just keeps going.

"Which one of you is so *fucking* stupid you can't even follow a goddamn order – *make fucking safe*, you know what that means, it means you make your goddamn weapon *safe*, you don't keep fucking firing!" Hester screams, and he's moving up and down the line of soldiers like a man possessed. "You're supposed to be trained soldiers, you're supposed to be ready for battle, but damn if you faggots are ready for anything more complicated than wiping your own goddamn assholes—"

Castiel presses his lips into a tight line.

Don't get involved, he tells himself. *Whatever you do, you cannot undermine another officer's authority. Don't – get - involved.*

At Castiel's side, Blake tenses, and there is the movement of his leg shifting beneath him like he's getting ready to sit up and confess.

"—what if you'd done that next week? Or in a month's time? What if some poor bastard is out in front of you – a medic, maybe, trying to patch up one of your friends, or an officer leading the way – and you try and make fucking safe and you shoot him? What if, god help you, you're involved in an ambush and you shoot off the element of surprise and blow the whole fucking mission with one moment of fucking idiocy." Hester's face is turning red. "I swear to fucking god, I should tear you a new asshole and send it back to your parents, write a note saying, *I'm sorry, your cock-sucking waste of a son couldn't even handle a fucking make safe, let alone a goddamn walking, talking Nazi—"*

Castiel shouldn't get involved.

"—now, right now, which one of you godamn, fucking *faggots*—"

Blake draws in a deep, shaky breath for courage.

Castiel raises his hand.

“Lieutenant Hester?” he calls, and in his peripheral vision, he sees Blake freeze.

There’s a pause. “What?”

“I miscounted the rounds as I let them off – I thought I’d finished my clip, but clearly I was wrong.” Castiel stares in the distance at his target, trying to appear as un-confrontational as possible. He keeps his rifle butt pushed into his shoulder, other hand raised levelly.

As he’s not looking at him, Castiel can’t see Hester’s reaction, but there is another long pause. Blake has stopped breathing altogether. Castiel can hear his heartbeat drumming inside his skull, waiting for Hester to speak.

“Lieutenant Novak, stand up.”

He does, leaving his rifle laid carefully on the gravel, and turns to Hester, bracing himself to attention. He stares blankly ahead, expressionless, as Hester treads slowly closer. His face is still red; he’s breathing far too fast. Castiel is marginally worried for his health – but only marginally, as for the most part he’s just plain irritated. It’s one thing to crack under pressure; it’s another thing to do it so unprofessionally, and to be such an asshole about it.

However, before Hester can even open his mouth, they are interrupted.

“Lieutenants, what’s going on?”

Captain Milton stands a few feet from off from Hester, looking displeased.

Hester swivels to brace and salute him, while Castiel waits motionless where he is, waiting almost boredly for Hester to unleash the wrath of heaven upon him. He does try to overhear what Milton and Hester are discussing in low voices, although without great success. There is a hardness to Milton’s voice, a shakiness to Hester’s; they talk for a moment or two, while the rest of one- and two-platoon remain frozen.

Then, at last, Milton calls out, “Is there any rifleman who has not yet made safe?” No-one answers, and taking this as a negative response, Milton continues to instruct them to unload, stand up, and dress back from the firing point to be replaced by the next fire-team.

That’s it.

Milton addresses Castiel briefly to warn him that he needs to be much more careful with his drills, and then heads back off to resume whatever he was discussing with the staff inside the hut at the back of the range. Hester begins instructing the next fire-team, albeit sulkily, and Castiel retrieves his rifle from his firing point before heading off to wait for his next turn. Nothing else happens. It’s all rather unsettlingly anti-climatic, but Castiel supposes it’s better than getting torn to shreds by his superiors.

As Blake hurries past Castiel, they make brief eye-contact, but Blake doesn’t say anything – probably for fear of pushing his luck and still

being exposed. Castiel stops him anyway, speaking to him in an undertone so as not to draw any more suspicion to the whole event.

“I didn’t do that for you, Private,” Castiel tells him. “If you make another mistake, I expect you to report it immediately. And I don’t expect you to make another mistake.”

“No, sir,” Blake says hastily. “It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“The fundamentals of what Hester said are true,” Castiel says. “You do that in Normandy, you put a lot of people in danger. We don’t have time for you to be making these kind of rookie errors - I want to see a lot better from you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re dismissed.”

Blake pulls off a salute and, cheeks burning red with embarrassment, says no more about it before returning to the rest of his group. Watching him go, Castiel adjusts the strap of his rifle sling and doesn’t think too hard about what’s just happened; he doesn’t need that kind of paranoia on top of everything else.

He goes to find two-platoon’s secondary lieutenant, one Inias Wallace, and drops down to sit cross-legged beside him, rifle resting idly between his knees. Inias comments on how mortified Hester had looked when he’d been called out by Captain Milton, but otherwise wastes no time in steering the conversation to safer waters, away from the insults still hanging thick in the air like tear gas.

They talk about the weather, the shooting techniques of those currently on the firing point, their plans for the weekend, when they think they'll move out for France, but Castiel is hard to distract. Captain Milton is watching him.

May 30th 1944

"Lieutenant Novak?"

Castiel slows, and then stops. Stepping quickly to the side of the path so as not to block anyone else's path, he turns back. A few feet down the path behind him is Captain Milton; Castiel waits under he comes closer before bracing up and saluting. "Sir."

Milton comes to attention and snaps a salute back before nodding at Castiel by way of a more informal greeting. "Where were you headed?"

Exhaling heavily, Castiel shifts his feet apart to stand more comfortably. "Not really anywhere. I was going to see if there were any new books in the library, but it's not important," he says with a non-committal shrug. "Am I needed?"

"Actually, I was wondering if I could talk to you about something," Milton says.

Ridiculously, the first thing that flashes into Castiel's mind is Dean Winchester, the words *I've been found out* stamped all over the image in great bleeding, accusatory letters, before he remembers that he

hasn't done anything and he's never going to do anything and if he sometimes looks at another man when he's not supposed to, that's not a crime – except it is, and his heartbeat won't slow down in his chest no matter what he tells himself. "Of course, sir," he says around a tongue that seems to have swollen ten times in size. "What do you need?"

Milton's hands settle behind his back in an almost-exaggerated gesture of nonchalance; the sight of it makes Castiel nervous. Milton clears his throat. "Novak, what would you say to being appointed 2IC of Baker Company's assault on Dog Green?"

Castiel doesn't quite know what he really expected, but it wasn't that. He blinks. "Sir," he starts, "I'd be honoured, sir, of course – forgive me, but I thought that role had been designated to Lieutenant Hester."

"It had, but," Milton pauses here, as though considering his words carefully, "it's being reassigned." He meets Castiel's eyes, expression serious. "I've discussed it with regimental staff and the conclusion we came to was that you'd be able to cope better under pressure."

Castiel thinks back to Hester's meltdown yesterday and can't help but silently agree.

"You're a good leader, a good tactician," Milton continues. "You're more than competent, and I think you're the best candidate. Do you think you can handle it?"

Extremely conscious of Milton eyeing him, judging his every reaction, Castiel makes an effort not to appear too anxious in considering the proposition. Second-in-command. Theoretically, an easy enough position - but if anything were to happen to Captain Milton... He swallows. "Well, I've never led an amphibious assault on occupied coastline before, so I can hardly speak from experience, but I believe I

can handle it."

Milton's lips press into a thin line. "I'm going to need a little more than *belief,* Novak."

Castiel stands up straighter. "I can handle it, sir."

"Good." Milton nods. He turns his head off to the side, takes a moment to watch some young Lance Corporals arguing over a game of crabs by the side of the path. He looks back. "There'll be a briefing tonight, twenty-hundred-hours in the S-1's office. We'll be going over some new intel – the RAF got a few good pictures yesterday when the sky was clear. You can take a better look at the maps, then."

"Yes, sir. Anything else, sir?"

"No, that'll be all."

They stiffen for salute, Castiel first, then Captain Milton, and fall back into their regular lives as previously scheduled. Castiel turns on his heel and heads on towards the library, just because he feels that he needs to retain some feeling that everything is just the same as it was five minutes ago, but that feeling is steadily slipping away.

2nd June 1944

Castiel has never been a particularly big fan of meat broth, and so

when the Battalion are invited out of their lodgings for dinner in the HQ mess hall, he isn't particularly enthused. He has a meeting with Captain Milton to attend first, regarding the organisation of the troops tomorrow morning for the move out west, and he isn't too bothered that he's going to turn up late. However, the instant that he enters the mess hall to see spaghetti, hot-dogs and ice-cream, he wonders for a second if the base has been hit by a bomb and sent him off to heaven early.

He stands stupefied in a doorway, just breathing in the hot, greasy smell of it all for a while, until he's jostled aside by some over-eager privates from HQ Company – "'scuse, sir," – "sorry, Lieutenant" – "are those *hot-dogs*?!" – at which point he realises that, yes, the food is real, and that he's starving.

Moving quickly to find his way back into the queue, Castiel gets busy piling his plate high with spaghetti, and then slowly navigates the chaos and noise of the mess-hall, each one crammed full of hungry soldiers eating as much of the treats as they can fit in their bellies.

Officers get first priority to eat, and so by this time of evening they've already eaten and cleared out to smoke or plan the day ahead of them – although there's not much need for planning, as the general order of the day tomorrow will be clearing out of Falmouth, onto great battleships that will set sail from England and take them across to occupied France. Either way, at this point, the officers' mess is blissfully empty; Castiel has the pick of any table in which to sit and eat his spaghetti in peace.

He is only two forkfuls through his meal when a dinner tray clatters down opposite him.

"You ever heard of the Last Supper?" Dean Winchester asks conversationally, digging his spoon deep into the world's biggest helping of strawberry ice-cream.

Castiel doesn't look up. "Familiar with it." He twirls spaghetti idly around his fork, once, twice, three times. He picks it up, losing half of it on the way to his mouth, and takes a bite. "Why?"

"No reason."

Castiel's eyes lift sceptically to meet Dean's.

Dean cocks his eyebrows pointedly. "It's good ice-cream, that's all," he says, and then, as if to prove a point, shoves an enormous spoonful into his mouth. "Lambs, slaughter. You know."

Exhaling sharply, Castiel sets down his cutlery. "You're not an officer," he states.

"No, sir," Dean replies cheerfully.

"This is the officers' mess," says Castiel. "What are you doing here?"

Dean shrugs, clearly unfazed by Castiel's disapproval. "I figured you could use some company."

"You were wrong."

Spoon clinking against his bowl, Dean comments offhandedly, "No offense, sir, but has anyone ever told you you're kind of an asshole?"

Right. *Right.* Irritation sears hotly under Castiel's skin, and really, *that* is all he can stand. "Actually, no, they haven't," he snaps, glaring, "because I'm *not* an asshole. *You*, on the other hand, are loud, rude, disruptive, arrogant, and have absolutely no respect for my authority, my company, or anything we try to achieve." Castiel picks up his fork and points it, prongs-first, in Dean's face. "I'm not an asshole, Winchester. I just have very little tolerance for people who waste my time." And with that, he takes another clumsy forkful of pasta and eats it.

For a few moments, there is a long, tense silence. Castiel eats his dinner with more indignation than is probably called for; Dean, as far as Castiel can tell, makes no move to eat anything.

Then, eventually, Dean says, "You think I don't respect you?"

Castiel lifts his head, taken by surprise – half by Dean's words, half by the newfound tone of sincerity in them. Castiel finishes chewing, slowly. "Don't you?" he asks brusquely.

Dean just looks at him, his expression cool and steady. At first, Castiel thinks that he's not going to answer; the apprehension in his eyes is so calm and understanding that Castiel can only assume it's disdainful. Then he speaks.

"Lieutenant," he starts, quiet but firm, "you're what – twenty-four? Twenty-five? And the way I see it, you command a platoon of thirty men, if not a whole damn company, better than most guys can command their own bowels – and those men follow you out of nothing *but* respect. Not 'cause they're scared of you, not 'cause they have to... but simply because they'd rather riddle themselves full of bullets than let you down. And because, I guess, they also trust you not to let 'em get riddled full of bullets in the first place. I don't think I'd be wrong in saying that most of those men would throw themselves off a cliff if you said *jump.*" Dean presses his lips tight together and leans forwards, across the table, to catch back Castiel's

eyes when they fall downwards. “Sir, you’re one of the best officers I ever met in this place or any other, and if I didn’t respect you, I’d be dumber than all those Krauts put together.”

Castiel is silent. He looks at Dean, weighing him up, trying to gauge if he really means all that.

Dean then gives a short chuckle, and he picks up his spoon again. “But then, if I told you all that, you’d go getting a big head,” he says, raising his eyebrows, and he scrapes around the bottom of his bowl for the leftover slush of his ice-cream. He lifts the spoon halfway to his lips and then pauses, smirking a little, and deliberately adds, “*Sweetheart*.”

Castiel’s mouth twists, not sure what to say to all that. In the end, he opts for telling him, “I’m twenty-eight, actually.”

“Happy belated birthday, sir.”

Unexpectedly, a brief huff of laughter breaks from Castiel’s mouth. He looks down at his pasta again, twisting the remnants of it around and around his fork. “You’ve got a weird way of showing respect for someone, I’ll tell you that much,” Castiel says, trying to keep his tone cold, but it’s difficult to maintain after Dean’s bizarre and unexpected declaration.

Dean exhales slowly. “Well…” Considering what Castiel has said carefully, Dean bites his spoon, the concave of it flattening his lower lip, bringing up a pink in it which Castiel very pointedly does not look at it. Dean hesitates another second before speaking. “If you don’t mind me saying, it seems to me you’ve got a hell of a lot of weight on your shoulders right about now.” Another mouthful of ice-cream. “Figured you could use a pick me up.”

Castiel stares at him, feeling like the ground has just been taken out from under his feet. He doesn't even try to process the real meaning of what Dean has just said. He just says, "Winchester, you weren't *picking me up* – you were making me look stupid."

Dean grimaces, and for the first thing, there's something like remorse in his expression. "That wasn't the intention. Hell, half of the time I was only trying to make you laugh." He raises his eyebrows at Castiel. "You might've found it funnier if you'd lighten up a little."

"I might've found it funnier if any of it was actually funny."

Sighing, Dean holds up his hands in surrender. "Okay. My fault. Fine." He grins then, bright and cheerful. "Are we done throwing hissy fits about your *authority* now?"

Castiel sighs exasperatedly. "Yes. We're done."

As they both fall quiet and start picking at their respective meals again, Castiel eyes Dean with uncertainty. It all sounded honest, but he still isn't sure he's comfortable with Dean's declarations of something like affection, like he's *looking out for him* or something. Castiel doesn't need anything like that; he needs men below him who'll do as they're told when he tells them and think for themselves when he can't. That's it.

And then, somehow, words are spilling unbidden over his tongue before he even realises what he is saying. "I got made 2IC of the assault on Dog Green."

Dean nods, detachedly impressed. "Congrats," he says.

“Yeah,” Castiel mutters. He supposes that chains of command don’t mean all that much to medics; you go out, you grab a body, you stitch it up or send it home or declare it dead. End of. “Something like that.”

“Aw, you’ll do fine, sir,” Dean says reassuringly. “And if you do get shot… well – that’s what I’m there for.” He makes snipping noises with his teeth and mimes sewing something, his hand making grand sweeping loops in the air. “Don’t sweat it.”

Something that has been bugging Castiel throughout the duration of this conversation, from the very second that Dean presumptuously invited himself to Castiel’s table and sat down with an ice-breaker, finally becomes concrete in Castiel’s mind. He stares across at Dean, eyes narrowing slightly as he takes in the sight before him – not the *man,* per say, with the big hands and narrow waist and straight nose, but rather the positioning of it all; the way he slouches as he eats, perfectly at ease, the way he gestures loosely with his free hand, and indeed, occasionally with his spoon as well, like they’ve been conversing like this all their lives. Like they’re comfortable.

“We’re not friends, Winchester,” Castiel says cautiously.

Dean pretends to recoil violently. “God, no,” he exclaims. “Wouldn’t dream of it, sir.”

Castiel eyes him, uncertain of how this all will end, and Dean stares straight back, green eyes open and honest, waiting for the judgement of him that he’s obviously aware is currently underway. Castiel can find nothing to fault in Dean’s demeanour, and there is something about his easy presence that is maybe just a *little* bit comfortable all, so there’s no harm in it. Castiel makes a soft *hmph*-ing noise and settles back to his spaghetti.

And so that's the end of that. They sit together, eating their pasta and ice-cream respectively, and don't say a damn word more, but Castiel is glad of the company.

June 3rd, 1944

The loading of the boats begins early in the morning and doesn't stop for hours, an endless flood of men and machinery – all perfectly organised, having been rehearsed countless times, but from the outside it looks like chaos. LCVPs rolling up onto the battleships, heavily laden with artillery of every shape and size, weapons, jeeps; officers running around marshalling the movement. The air is thick with a mixture of fear and excitement; in the case of Baker Company, it's mostly excitement, especially since Private Reznik claims to have bumped into Supreme Commander Eisenhower in the latrine.

They're formed up in three ranks just out of the way of the loading until Captain Milton comes back to tell them it's their turn to collect their rations, and, upon reaching the collection point, they discover to their glee that the mess sergeants are also distributing two packs of cigarettes to each soldier, regardless of whether he smokes or not. Castiel stands to the side, counting the men as they pass through and redirecting them, and it is because of this that, towards the end of the queue, he notices that they are one man short. Dean is missing.

Castiel glances back behind him, scouring the crowds of men, and – there. Dean is knelt by the side of the road, some ten yards or so back, and he is writing something.

"Winchester," Castiel calls. Dean glances quickly towards him, acknowledging him with a short nod, but doesn't so much as lift his pen. Castiel frowns. "Sergeant Winchester!" Still no response.

Castiel grabs Sergeant Milligan to tell him to get the men to form up once they've received their rations before heading over to where Dean is frantically scribbling. Several sheets of paper are strewn across his thigh, on which he's leaning to write, being careful not to punch any holes through the paper. His left hand is trying all at once to hold one piece of paper still so that he can write on it and to keep the rest of the paper from blowing away, which doesn't seem to be going too well for him. He notices Castiel approaching and looks up again. "Sorry—" he mumbles around the ink-blotchy pen-lid stuck between his teeth. "One second, sir, I just—"

"Let's go, Winchester," Castiel says, standing over him. "Your letter can wait. You need to get your rations and cigarettes."

"Don't need cigarettes," Dean replies instantly, still concentrating on whatever he's writing.

Castiel lifts his eyebrows – Dean smokes as much as the other men in the company, if not more. "Well, you definitely need rations."

"Yeah – I just – one second." He's scrawling now, his words barely legible from what Castiel can see upside-down. "I just – need to—"

"You can finish it later—"

"Not if I want it sent before I get to France, I can't."

Castiel rolls his eyes. "Come on, I'm sure she'll wait for you."

Dean doesn't look up as he mutters, "It's for my little brother – so yeah, I should damn hope he's gonna wait."

However, Castiel can see him penning *Sergeant Dean Winchester, 91W1O*, and then he signs with a messy flourish and stands, collecting all the loose sheets in his hands and shuffling them into the right order. He takes the lid from between his teeth and clicks it back onto his pen, stuffing it haphazardly back into his pocket. He has the blue blossom of an ink stain on the corner of his bottom lip.

"Right," Dean says, folding the papers. "Sorry about that, sir. Where am I going now, then?"

Castiel directs him towards the rations' collection point, where the next company is already starting to line up, and Dean runs off to catch up.

The rest of Baker Company is already fell into three ranks, everything packed away into their haversacks, and waiting patiently to be loaded. Dean falls in a second later, hastily stuffing his rations into his pockets, and trying to be surreptitious about licking stamps and sticking them onto an envelope from the rear rank. Then Captain Milton comes to fetch them, and it's their time to move.

The Force O boats are all lined up towards the eastern end of the port, and the *Thomas Jefferson,* the one on which the 116th infantry regiment are going to be travelling, is at the far end. As they reach the boarding ramp, senior divisional officers hand out sheets of paper, one side covered in small, neat typewriting. "Don't read it now, son," one of them says when he hands one to Castiel, with the bored tone of a man who has said these same words to every one of the thousand men who have passed him so far. "You'll have plenty of time for reading when you get on board."

Castiel climbs up the ramp onto the deck, and stands to one side to supervise the rest of his company climbing aboard. As he counts the last few men, he can't help himself; he looks down at the piece of paper in his hand.

It reads,

Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force:

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hope and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you.

Castiel skim-reads the rest – it's going to be dangerous, yes, they aren't all going to make it home, yes, they're going to make a difference, yes, victory will be ours – and skips to the bottom to read the name of the sender.

General D. Eisenhowever, S.C.A.E.F

His eyes widen. Well, damn. He folds it neatly into quarters and stows it for safe-keeping inside one of the waterproof ammunition bags he keeps in his jacket's breast pocket.

Then he looks up and over the port, where men and weapons are still being manoeuvred back and forth, trying to get ready for the imminent invasion. The sun is still hazy in the sky, but the swirls of salt air coming off the Channel are thinning the clouds, light falling as a dull shine on the matte paint of the vehicles still on land, glinting off British cap-badges. Beyond the walls of the dock, civilians are stretched as far as the eye can see, dissolving from individual faces to a great buzzing blur. They wave handkerchiefs, flags, chubby baby hands from their mother's arms.

Castiel can't help himself; he lifts a hand. There is no noticeable response – the rising and falling swell of noise is fairly constant – but then again, he supposes he's only a green-clothed speck among thousands on a grand boat for a grand procedure. However, just as he's lowering his hand, he sees one little girl pressed up against a railing along the waterfront, looking right at him and waving frantically. He gives a small smile, and briefly lifts his hand once more before turning away. As long as one person knows he was here, that's enough for him.

Chapter 3: Omaha

June 4th 1944

Dear Sam,

Well, it's finally happening. These past few days the port here has been chaos, but now everything is set to go – weapons ready, boots polished, the boats all loaded except for one thing, which is us. By the end of the afternoon, though, I figure we'll be on our way. So far everything's been alright here, anyway. I managed to sort out my issues with Lieutenant Novak, so maybe he's not as enormous an asshole as I thought first. Don't get me wrong, he's still an asshole, but he's okay. I get why the guys like him so much though – he doesn't take shit from anyone, me included, but he's got a way about him like he expects the best of you, even if you've let him down a billion times before. Kind of makes you want to do better. I don't know. We had a long talk about books the other day – civil to one other and everything! – and it turns out he's a big Hemingway fan. I said I knew a pretty intense Hemingway fan myself and for a second it looked like he was ready to go into a whole debate about the merits of his writing until he realised I wasn't talking about me. Maybe I'll read some when I get back, when I've got time. Not that I'll get much opportunity for a while, though. Hey, maybe there'll just be books lying around Normandy for any soldier to pick up and leaf through. I wish

I don't know what it'll be really like – apparently England doesn't count, seeing as they all refer to The Continent here anyway, like it's a totally different world – although this ain't exactly going to be a celebrity world tour by the time we get off the boats on the other side of the Channel. I think I'm excited? I'm not sure. It's kind of hard to tell. But we know our drills, and we know each other, and everyone can work together so as not to let anyone get hurt – and if they do, then I can fix them up and it'll be fine. I think. Either way, I'll definitely come out alright, so there's no need to worry about me, I swear.

Hell if I'm not worried about, you though. I still don't understand – what exactly happened with dad? Did he just lose it or was he drinking again or what? I'll write to him direct if you need me to, tell him to back off. You're

twenty, for Christ's sake – he should be grateful you're still living under his roof at all, let alone misbehaving under it. It just sucks you didn't even get the date you wanted, although I guess there's nothing wrong with getting to know her friends. Seriously, I think she likes you. Just don't skive off any more revision workshops for her – I don't care how gorgeous she is, she's not worth failing a class for. I mean it. Well done on your first exam though, I'm proud of you. Only another four to go, right? I've got them written in my notebook, so I don't know when I'll be able to write next but I'll get the guys to wish you luck all the way from France!

I'll write again at some point soon, when I get into France. Wish me luck! And look after yourself, alright? Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

June 4th 1944

If there was little to do in Falmouth, there's even less to do aboard the *Thomas Jefferson.* The Force O ships are the first to move out, having the furthest to go, and are preceded only by the minesweepers; this means that the men of the 116th are trapped in a confined space for the longest. They sleep a lot; they gamble with any and all money they've got with them; some brought books. Some spend their time throwing up, but the majority of them have already got their sea-legs and are unbothered by the perpetual sway and rock. They listen to the radio, but hearing the German Axis Sally broadcast laughing at them, *I'll see you in the morning, boys!* like she knows something unsettles some of the men, even if it's the same bullshit she's been spewing for

the past month.

Castiel is jittery. He knows most of his men are raring to go, all swapping stories about how they're going to gun down their first Kraut, how they've been waiting so long to finally get going, and, to some extent, Castiel feels the same, but the longer he spends on this ship, drifting slowly towards the enemy, the tighter the knots in his stomach coil. According to Inias, Lieutenant Hester resents Castiel enormously for taking his position as second-in-command, and Castiel is more aware than ever that failure simply is not an option.

However, being around the rest of Baker, especially his own platoon, always serves to settle his nerves. He has never made any comment about being nervous, but the others somehow seem to sense it anyway, and are doing their best to distract him – asking him if he wants to join their game of cards, offering him a piece of their D-rations' bars, telling him every joke they know. They don't let him sit quietly at the end of the mess table where he can stew in his thoughts; they drag him into the middle and get him involved.

"We ain't gonna need to speak French, are we?" worries Private Corbett. "I don't know any – man, I took science in high school instead."

"Hey, wouldn't it be German we're supposed to worry about?" Dean Winchester cuts in. "Surely that must be more important."

"Who needs to be able to speak Kraut?" Zeddmore says, grinning. "Just drum 'em, let your rifle do the talking." He gets a resounding cheer for that comment, a few sage nods and *hear, hear*.

"Oh yeah, sure thing," Dean says pointedly. He rolls his shoulders back in exaggerated movements, back arching. He has shed his combat jacket; his T-shirt stretches across his chest. "Let me just warm

up to get in the killing zone, why don't I?"

Zeddmore laughs. "Okay, Doc, *you* might need some languages."

"Well, fuck me," Dean says. Castiel watches the shape of his mouth around the words. "I don't know a damn word."

"Ah, don't worry," Pat Barnes says, spinning his fork in lazy gesticulating circles. "After all, we got translators for that shit."

Dean shrugs and settles back to his dinner.

"Ladies, you'd best just let me lead the way," Garth Fitzgerald drawls, holds his arms out wide – knocking Corporal Harvelle's glass over as he does – and smiles smugly. "French just happens to be my area of expertise. Mercy boko and all that jazz, you know."

Harvelle recoils back from his table, now covered in the water washing over from his tipped glass. "Hey, watch it!" he says crossly, and he shoves Garth hard. "And, anyway, it's *merci beaucoup,* you asshole."

On the other side of the table, out of reach of Harvelle's irritation, the younger privates chorus a girly *ooooo-ooh;* Gallagher lapses into giggles so intense that he chokes on his dinner and every man at the table very quickly draws dibs on not being the one to resuscitate him if he goes down.

"I know some French, actually," Castiel says thoughtfully, pushing the last of his meat absently back and forth across his plate. "Years back, seventh grade or so - this kid on my street bought a book and he told

us all about it."

"What, you mean that jackass Johnny Ascott on Fourth who thought he was hot shit?" Inias asks from a few places down the bench, and he snorts derisively into his food when Castiel nods. "Christ. Fucker thought a few shitty phrases made him some sex bomb."

"Go on, then, sir," says Dean, and Castiel looks up, surprised, when he realises that Dean is talking to him and not Inias. Dean's lips twist sideways a little, baby start of a smile, and he nods encouragingly. "Teach me something."

Castiel breathes an almost-laugh, lips barely parting. He has no idea where it comes from, but he cocks an eyebrow and says, "I got an essential phrase for you – hold onto this one," and then he's thinking of all the immature things that seventh-grade boys used to laugh about, and he's looking at the shape of Dean's lips around his empty fork, that goddamn oral fixation, the way he plays the tines against his lower lip to leave little pink dents – and Castiel's brain just switches off and he says, "*Je veux te faire une pipe.*"

Inias smothers a laugh into his drink, even as Castiel realises the blatant idiocy of what he's just done, but Dean is oblivious, just grinning wide and trying to repeat it, stumbling over the foreign vowels: "*Che verde fay* – wait, what was it? *Che verde fair oo peep?*"

There is nothing Castiel can do. Inias is slowly reddening with the attempt not to ruin the moment, and from the way Castiel can feel heat burning deep on his neck and his ears, he might be going the same way soon for very different reasons. The other men are chattering among themselves trying to work out what's happening - *no, man, I heard 'peep' – it's about strippers, I swear* – and Castiel realises he's just got to get this over with as fast as possible so that they can all move on.

“Look, don’t hurt yourself, alright, I was only screwing with you,” Castiel says, and as Inias realises that he has been given to go-ahead to laugh and finally explodes, Castiel leans back casually in his seat. He smirks, thin and cocky, and fixes Dean’s eyes unabashedly – it’s the only way to get away with this – when he says, “It means *I want to suck your dick*.”

Dean’s face does not fall at the embarrassment; his expression doesn’t change at all – eager, rapt, as he waited for the English explanation – but now something is different. “Ouch – bitchy,” he exclaims, shaking his head as though he should have known better than to fall for it. “Gosh, and I trusted you, sir,” he goes on, sighing, and it’s all there, the silly half-smile, the crinkled laugh-lines, but the truth of it is in the eyes. Steady, dark, fiercely quiet – and never once leaving Castiel’s.

Inias, still cackling maniacally, excuses himself and leaves to get another drink of water to calm himself down, while the privates burst into fresh peals of laughter and dopey imitations of Dean’s poor attempts to mimic the French. Castiel just shrugs, nonchalant, and lifts his eyebrows at Dean in an attempt to fight the nervous rush of heat, the colour creeping brazen on his neck and hands, the speeding stutter of his blood beneath his skin.

Someone is speaking, distantly as though a million miles away – something about being careful of looking out for French queers, some crude joke with a gesture – and conversation is, thankfully, steering in a safer direction.

The moment is gone, except that Dean, still eating, bites at his lower lip, runs the tip of his tongue over it afterwards, and for the second time in five minutes, Castiel feels his sense of self-preservation slip; his eyes drop instinctively to follow the movement, and his own mouth is suddenly paper-dry as if in echo – *don’t do it don’t do it* – and he licks his lips, slowly. Dean’s gaze is heavy on him, almost tangible. Castiel doesn’t want to look up, but he finds Dean’s eyes again, and - *shit.* The heat spiking in Castiel’s belly has built and built to a stage where he must be unconsciously projecting his own desperation, because the weight of the sheer, naked desire in Dean’s eyes hits him like a

collapsing building, crushes him breathless.

"...Novak. *Novak.* Hey – someone grab Lieutenant Novak, will you?"

A hand grips Castiel's shoulder tight, shakes him, and he looks over, startled. "What?"

Down at the other end of the table, Captain Milton is stood, hands behind his back. Standing just behind are Lieutenants Alistair and Hester. Whatever this means, it isn't good.

Castiel lifts a hand to acknowledge that he's seen them, and starts quickly gathering up his things. He doesn't look at Dean; he can already feel his heartbeat thundering in his ears, and his hands are shaky in picking up his tray. He ditches his dinner at the disposal station, and follows Milton out of the mess hall, and up the stairs onto the deck.

"Is everything alright, sir?" Hester asks, but even before Milton speaks, Castiel is looking past him, out at the sea. Yesterday's good weather was promising, but today it has turned; the sky is dark, thick with heavy clouds that promise rain, and he knows it doesn't bode well.

"Lieutenants, the operation has been postponed," Milton says bluntly, getting right to the point, and Castiel's heart sinks. "The assault's been re-scheduled for the sixth – all the same timings, just a day later, if the weather improves. We're changing course to circle the Isle of Wight to see how it goes, but if we may have to call the whole thing off and return to base if it doesn't clear up."

Castiel swallows hard. "Yes, sir," he choruses with the other officers at his side.

“See to it that all of your men are informed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Milton nods curtly. “That’ll be all. You’re dismissed.”

“Yes, sir.”

It is already starting to rain.

6th June 1944

Oh-one-hundred hours. The boatswain’s whistle rings out shrill and ear-piercing, and as the decks fall into silence, the radio can be heard. “*Now hear this - all assault troops report to your debarkation areas. Repeat, all assault troops report to your debarkation areas*.”

Castiel is already awake. There are some things you don’t simply sleep easy before, and staging a hundred-and-fifty-thousand strong invasion of the best-defended beach in Nazi-occupied France is one of them.

He sits up to see the dark shape of his musette-bag and M1 at the foot of his bed, waiting for him. His clothes settle against his skin, cold and stiff. He walks swiftly out onto the deck; he and the hundreds of others heading to disembark move as one.

Oh-three-ten hours. The entirety of the 116th and 16th Regiments are gathered on the deck, lined up neatly by company and then, within that, by platoon. The staff officers are grouped loosely, interrupting the grave silence only occasionally and only then to discuss the morning ahead. No-one cracks any jokes. Even Gabriel, when Castiel catches sight of him two platoons over, is solemn. There is none of the taunting laughter and confidence that there had been the morning before; now there are just rows upon rows of soldiers waiting to be delivered.

Positioned at the front, Castiel is able to glance along the length of the line, and while he is aware that they are formed up with American soldiers of all shapes, sizes and colours, he cannot tell the difference between any of them. Every man, officer or enlisted, infantry or artillery, is faceless.

Castiel turns back to face the front.

Captain Milton stands at the head of the company, beside Castiel's platoon. He'll be going in with them; he wants to be one of the first on the beach. Castiel can't imagine why.

"Better weather this morning," Milton says softly, looking at the sky beyond the boats, which is still dark, cloudy, and ominous. Castiel does not say anything.

Oh-three-fifteen hours. One-platoon is the first to go; Castiel, as platoon leader, is the first to climb over the side of the LCT and down the salt-damp ropes into the landing craft below. He then gets to helping the rest of his men into the craft.

Oh-three-thirty hours. The LCVP is lowered into the English Channel,

and the individual features of the men on the deck are lost behind the metal, including Inias. Castiel swallows.

The dismount has been as even and easy as it was any of the times that they practiced, but this is not a practice. The skipper guns the engine noisily and they set off for Omaha.

The LCVPs are small, cramped, cold. Each craft is stuffed to the brim; the one in which Castiel's platoon are crammed contains a jeep full of ammunition, and a DD tank as well as the thirty men of one-platoon. The smaller soldiers, like Alfie Wilson, get crushed by the others whenever a particularly large wave buffets the sides of the boats; the larger ones try to keep their limbs tucked in close; almost everyone, indiscriminate of size or strength, throws up at least once. They are chilled to the bone, and damp too, as waves crest sharply off the metallic sides of the craft and spray high, and yet they are all sweating. The waves are rough. They cling to the sides to keep from falling on top of each other, but they can't hold their stomachs still. Castiel can hear someone praying; his fingers twist under the collar of his shirt and find his own crucifix. It's cold to the touch.

With shaky fingers, Castiel takes his cigarette tin from the pocket of his combats and removes one cigarette. He decides there and then, in a sudden rush of childish sentimentality, that he will smoke half a cigarette here, in this LCVP on the way to Normandy. He will only smoke half and only half, and then he'll tamp it out and put it back, and that cigarette will remain a charred and unfinished stub in the tin in his pocket until he goes home. And then, on the boat back to England when this whole affair is over, he'll smoke the other half.

He clicks the tin shut again – nearly loses it halfway across the boat when a wave hits them hard, starboard, and throws him sideways into Sergeant Barnes.

"Anyone got a light?" he asks, raising his voice over the roar of waves and rattle of engines.

Private Gideon tosses a lighter to him. He catches it, easy, and flicks it to the end of his cigarette. Over the dull red burn of it, he sees Dean, on the far side of the craft, watching him. His eyes are colourless in the dim light, but sharp and focused. Castiel presses his lips tighter together around the cigarette, pulls hard, and hands Gideon's light back. He exhales smoke, and loses sight of Dean in the cloud.

They spend what seems like far too long in the LCVPs – even by oh-five-hundred, the bombardment has only just started, explosions screaming through sound barriers, hot curls of flames on the horizon beyond what Castiel can see. It's the worst noise he has ever heard, so loud it rattles his ear-drums and threatens to split his temples in half, but he's reassured by it; every German killed by the Navy or the Air Corps means one less German to kill on the beach.

Oh-six-hundred hours.

The skipper yells something down to them, and Castiel suddenly panics when he realises that he hasn't heard what was said. By now, he has finished his half-cigarette and is twitching for the lack of something to do with his hands; mostly, they shake.

"Captain Milton?" he calls across the craft. "What's—"

"*Thirty seconds*!" Milton yells back to the whole platoon. "Be ready to move – don't waste any time. Clear out of the craft and out of the water as fast as possible, keep your actions clear, and for God's sake, don't do anything stupid! I'll see you on the other side."

Castiel's fingers tighten on his rifle. Thirty seconds.

Then, almost as soon as he has stopped to consider the thirty seconds ahead of them, it's over. They crash into the sandbar, hard, and the ramp drops and someone is screaming – but *why*, what's happening - because there's a chatter of gunfire, a spray of blood and Castiel is blinking it out of his eyes. Why is there blood already?

"*Over the sides*!" Sergeant Milligan screams, and suddenly the whole picture swirls back around Castiel – he sees the shredded body of someone he used to be familiar with, limp at the front of the craft; he sees the thin thread of blood twisting down over Captain Milton's nose, the smouldering dark hole when one eye used to be; he sees the thunder and ping of bullets eating up the metal in front of his feet.

He grabs the side of the craft, hauls himself bodily up – easy as the six-foot-wall on the obstacle course at Camp Kilmer, easy – and over into the water.

Castiel can swim, but he sinks fast. The water is stunningly, blindingly cold, dark with metal, and disorientating; Castiel thrashes, kicks and flails to find the surface, but can't – where is he even going – which way is up – *where the fuck is the beach* – and as his chest strains for lack of oxygen and he kicks out wildly under the water, he realises that it is a very real possibility that he might just drown and never reach the shore. He lashes out frantically, swimming like his mother taught him, but the weight of his equipment is too much and he's sinking down to the bottom faster than he can swim up. He wriggles out of his musette bag, drops his extra clips of ammunition, tries to keep his rifle but he fumbles and he doesn't have time to dive to find it because his lungs are *screaming*, his head a beating war-drum beneath the hollows of his skull – and then he's swimming up and up and up and he's going to die here *he's going to die here* and up and his head breaks the surface and he gasps.

For now, he doesn't give a shit that he's lost all his equipment and all his men; he's just overwhelming grateful that he didn't fucking *drown* in the first ten seconds of the Normandy invasion. He swims almost blindly, trying to blink through the sting of salt, and then eventually his feet hit sand, skid, and he drags himself upright.

The sight before him is a punch to the stomach.

Before him, Omaha Beach stretches out bright, pure and golden. It's something out of a Hollywood movie; at the shoreline, about a half mile ahead of him, there are shingles, great, smooth grey stones, and then, after a short section of swampy dirt, the beach slopes gently up into a grassy bluff, perfect and serene. In the distance beyond that, the twisting spire of a church is visible, along with neat red-roofed houses and concrete German bunkers. It's idyllic.

Moreover, it's untouched.

Castiel's eyes widen when he realises that Omaha Beach is not rubble and destruction as he had been promised – that, in fact, the bombardments have not made so much as a dent in the German defences – that somehow, everything has gone terribly wrong – but that's all the time he can spare to consider what *the fuck* has happened to their air and naval support, because there's a war on, after all.

He heaves himself forwards, running even though his sodden combats are weighing him down like a physical burden despite having thrown off his bags and his weapon and his ammunition, running even though the flickering sound of machine-gun-fire is all around him. He can see bodies nearby, leaking red into the water, but further ahead than that, he can see the tall metal hedgehog obstacles set up by the Germans to prevent effective tank-landings, and he can see the rounds clattering off the side of it, so that's the direction he heads.

As he gets closer, water sloshing up wildly around his legs, Castiel picks out shapes huddled behind the obstacles; as he gets closer still, he can identify one of them.

“Zeddmore,” he yells, and then he trips on something – looking back, he sees that he had fallen over a floating human arm, bearing a watch that Castiel tries very hard not to recognise. He scrambles to his feet, tries again. “*Zeddmore*!”

This time, the private looks around, and his face crumples with relief. “Thank god you’re here, sir,” he shouts back over the noise, and then embarrassedly confesses, “We had no idea what to do!”

Castiel’s heart clenches in his throat. He glances at the men clustered around Zeddmore; a handful of other privates from his platoon, all wet and shaken up and confused. No non-coms. Certainly no Captain Milton.

Shit. Captain Milton.

Castiel takes a deep, slow breath.

It’s okay. It doesn’t matter that they’ve lost their commanding officer – they just need to find their second-in-command, and *he’ll* know what to do and then everything will be alright – but the problem is that for some reason Castiel can’t for the life of him remember who was appointed 2IC. Wasn’t it Lieutenant Hester? No, Lieutenant Hester cracked under pressure; the role was given to someone else...

And then he remembers.

“Shit,” Castiel whispers under his breath.

“Sir, what’s going on?” asks Private Wilson. “Where are the other companies? Where are the tanks? Sir, I thought they were supposed to

—”

“Sir, what do we do—”

“Lieutenant, I’m too young to die, I’ve got a—”

“Shut the fuck up,” a familiar voice cuts in, and if Castiel had the time or the presence of mind to be relieved that Dean made it off the LCVP, he would, but he doesn’t.

Taking a second for another deep breath, Castiel looks around the side of the obstacle to assess the situation properly. It is another half mile or so of shallow water, scattered with obstacles, lost weapons and bodies, until the shoreline; it’s about three hundred yards or so beyond that until the bluffs. The cement blockades in front of the narrow roads up from the beach have not been destroyed as was promised; the concrete bunkers bearing German machine-guns and light artillery have not been destroyed either.

Castiel turns back to face the others and does a quick head-count. The privates, plus Dean, make five.

“Right,” he says, making an executive decision. “We can’t stay here to wait to see who else has made it - on my word, we’re going to make a run up towards the shoreline, up to that fallen minesweeper before our next move. No stopping at obstacles; no stopping for anyone you recognise. One long sprint, like we’ve practiced. Winchester, you’re with me.”

Dean jerks back a little in surprise, like Castiel has forgotten he isn’t infantry. “Sir, I haven’t got a weapon—”

“Join the club,” Castiel bites out, flexing his empty hands nervously even as he speaks. He peers around the side of the obstacle one last time. “Right – *move*!”

And they’re up and they’re running.

Mortars fall like rain here – rain, if rain hit the ground like a detonated building, shook your bones almost inside out, screamed fissures inside your brain to send you crawling back home – spraying sea-water over their heads a twisted mix of red and blue. Castiel barely notices the water cascading off his helmet; he’s focused on the drag of his feet through the water, trying not to fall over as the tide catches at his ankles and fills his boots.

His own breathing is thunderous inside his head, *gasp gasp gasp,* his hands in front of him empty and naked, clutching blindly as though he can haul himself free of the last snatching tendrils of the ocean. He can hear the clumsy crash of what seems to be left of his platoon behind him, but the splashes seem dimmer than when they started – who have they lost? – and Castiel is struggling to breathe, every muscle in his body begging to lie down, to crumple, or at the very least to stop trying to run in a condition where running is impossible.

Finally, after what seems like years, Castiel crashes down behind the minesweeper, where the water is only just above the knees, and Dean falls heavily beside him, gasping for air as the explosions whistle and roar above them.

“Where even are we?” Dean asks, flattening a hand over his chest as he fights to get his breath back.

“We’re right on target, Sergeant; the appropriate question would be where the fuck is everyone else?” Castiel corrects, shifting the weight of the combat jacket on his shoulders.

Dean laughs at that, even under the circumstances, and the sound is light and warming even when Castiel's hands are shaking from the cold and the adrenaline. Castiel glances back to see the other four – no – *shit* – three privates bearing down on them, stumbling and swearing incoherently as they drop into a crouch alongside the obstacle.

Up on the beach are more bodies. Castiel thinks he glimpses someone familiar, from the 116th, Able Company, sprawled out in several pieces a few metres along the sand, but then again, everyone is a little familiar, and there are a lot of bodies; the bullets rattling right over their heads threaten a similar fate. Castiel twists back to look the other way, trying to see if he can see anyone else from their company, much less from their platoon. There are men wandering confusedly up from the sea, but they're too far back to identify and too far back to wait for – there are shapes huddled behind obstacles, shapes running blindly up the sand, shapes screaming orders, getting hit, falling back, shapes kneeling around other shapes, significantly smaller shapes with a greater distribution over the immediate area—

"So what now, sweetheart?"

Castiel looks back sharply at Dean. There is a shallow graze along one cheek, blood smearing half-heartedly down his jaw, but underneath that is the same lopsided smile, teeth nudging at his lower lip, and it's all so devastatingly *normal* that Castiel almost smiles back.

He turns to the privates instead.

"Zeddmore, Miller, Wilson, how're you feeling?"

Zeddmore sways woozily on his knees like he might throw up; Wilson grits his teeth so hard he looks like he might bust his jaw, but he nods

stoically. Miller tugs on the front of his helmet. “Never better, sir. Should we lay down suppressive fire?” he shouts.

“No, there’s no point,” Castiel cuts him off. “You’re not going to get anything done firing down here.”

The problem is the height difference; the bluffs rise smoothly above them to nearly thirty feet, and are seemingly without blemish. Now that they are closer, they can see that there are in fact dips and ledges high above them which conceal pillboxes and machine-gun posts, but trying to aim at them and have any real effect would be less than useless. Their best bet is, first of all, to get off the goddamn beach.

“Sir?” Dean asks. Castiel glances over at him and sees that he is looking away, into the distance behind them, at the men scattered all over the beach and drifting in the shallows. Dean drags himself back to focus on Castiel, and his face is severe. “Permission to go and do my *actual* job?”

Castiel has a moment of weakness. “Permission denied,” he replies bluntly. “I need you, Dean.”

Dean stares back at him, his lips pressed into a thin line of disapproval, but he doesn’t complain. His eyes are steady on Castiel’s, and trusting. *I don’t believe that you’re making the right choice*, he says, *but I’ll do whatever you ask.*

Castiel tears his eyes away. “Prepare to move,” he orders them, raising his voice over the screeching cry of mortars falling nearby. He takes a deep breath, braces his empty hands on his knees to push up. “*Move*.”

Every muscle burning with protest, Castiel drags himself to his feet and sets off sprinting. He distantly remembers the intensive training

preparing for this day, far away as though in a dream, and remembers the men complaining that after the training, combat couldn't possibly be all that bad – they were wrong.

He's barely three steps from the minesweeper when his ears is filled with a whistling scream, louder and louder and shaking through his whole body – he half-twists back to yell for his men to get down, when he remembers something one of the veterans had said: *if you can hear the shell, you're fine. You're fucked when you can't hear the shell.* He twists back to face the front, suddenly made bold – he can hear the mortars hiss and scream all around him, and that makes him invincible. He keeps running.

They duck down at the next obstacle barely ten seconds, long enough to ensure that they're all okay – Wilson's eyes are welling up; Zeddmore actually does throw up this time – and then they're up and away.

The water is getting shallow now, swirling around his knees as opposed to around his waist, and he can move faster although still very conscious of the possibility of falling flat on his face with all the sea-water filling his boots.

Somewhere behind Castiel there is a crackle and a high, tortured scream, and the warm light of flames rolling upwards. It's a dumb, rookie move, but Castiel can't help it – he turns back to see what happened, and he sees the flames consuming one of the tanks which had made a brave attempt at getting onshore, the fire licking hungrily around the men trying to climb out of it – and then he sees Dean's face, wide-eyed, the movement of his mouth – *"GET DOWN!"* – and for the first time, Castiel notes that everything has gone strangely silent.

And then there's a slam into the meat of his left shoulder like a crack with a steel-plated baseball bat, and if he wasn't down already, he is now.

He finds himself on his hands and knees in the water, smashed low enough that his hair drags in the surf and sticks against his forehead, salty – and he doesn't entirely know what's happening with the ringing in his ears, the distant yell of *"sir – Lieutenant",* the pain that throbs through his entire body, a heavy disabling pulse that's just slightly out of his time with his heartbeat. Shakily, he tries to stand up, wondering what the fuck just happened.

Suddenly Dean is right in front of him, wrapping one hand around Castiel's upper arm and hauling him upright. "Lieutenant," he's yelling, like a million miles away. "Can you hear me?"

"Fuck off, I'm fine," Castiel says, pushing at him, and ignoring the pain that sears immediately all up one arm at the movement. "*Keep moving*!"

The run up to the next obstacle seems longer now, almost endless. Every footstep sends a fresh wave of pain through the left side of his body and the beach before him swirls and spins in a shades of brown and grey as the sharp ache of it clouds his vision. He's exhausted – his boots are full of water, he can feel the mother of all blisters coming up on the back of his heel, his combats are sodden and sticky and weighing him down, and his legs are just plain *tired*. He trips over a lone boot – no, make that lone boot complete with leg – and one of his knees buckles, but he staggers forwards to hide the weakness.

The next obstacle is only a few metres away.

When Castiel falls behind it, however, he discovers that's already occupied by a number of other lost and frightened soldiers. They press themselves flat against the metal to make more room, their boots scuffing up sand and water. They stare up at Castiel. Not one of them looks a day over twenty.

“Who’s in command here?” Castiel asks – but he glances over their ranks and, with a sinking heart, knows the answer even before they say it.

“Uh, you are, sir,” one of them says shakily. “Company A, sir – we had a captain but he—”

“That doesn’t matter,” Castiel interrupts, his voice scratched hoarse as he tries to make himself heard over the noise - the frantic yells of soldiers, the clattering roar of explosion, the hiss of flames. “Follow us, you’ll be alright.” He pauses to take a deep breath, his lungs still protesting the hard work of getting this far, and glances around the men that he has at his disposal. “We’re going to move up over the shingle to the seawall. We should be out of range of the gunners then. It’s not far – a hundred metres or so. One quick sprint and we’ll be away – understood?”

“Sir,” Wilson suddenly cuts in, gasping for breath; Castiel turns to see him bent double, his knees given out and waist-deep in water. His eyes are watery red like he’s putting all his effort into not crying. “Sir, my ankle – I think I twisted it again, I can’t – I can’t—”

“Yes, you can,” Castiel says. “You can’t stay here, Wilson. The only way out of here is forwards, you hear me?”

Wilson’s lower lip shudders petulantly but he balls his hands into little fists. “Yes, sir.”

“Alright, A Company, you coming? Prepare to move, everyone!” Castiel risks a quick look around the side of the obstacle, surveying the land ahead of them. The shingle isn’t too far, and after that things should be relatively easy... if only the Navy or the engineers or

someone, fucking *anybody*, would get the fuck in here and blow those blockades. Castiel looks back around his men, watching those who have weapons nervously shifting their grips. "*Move*."

They run. The water is shallow now, and they can all-out sprint like they're supposed to, like they were trained - and Castiel is still breathing rough and ragged, his whole body shaking with the exertion, one side going numb from the pain still coursing through it – but he's suddenly gripped with the profound sense that everything is going to be alright. Once they get to the seawall, they can climb over it and away, finish the Krauts, and round it off as a job well done. Meet up with the rest of Company B, have a cup of joe and settle in for the next stage in winning the war.

Two things happen then.

First, there is a short, high cry somewhere behind Castiel, familiar enough that he not only knows what has just happened, but whom to.

Second, he sees the barbed wire.

Castiel crunches up towards the shingles, his ears filled with the sound of his feet slamming down over stones, sea-shells and tattered military uniforms, and he runs over the open stretch of sand, and that's when he sees that the shingle is covered with a tangled hedge of barbed wire all the way towards the seawall.

He freezes, unsure what to do. There is no way forwards. There is no way back. He drops to one knee, makes himself a smaller target, and, in the pause while he plans what to do next, he looks back to confirm what he already knew.

Wilson's weak ankle has given out, and he is now crumpled in a vague

backwards direction, his uniform blood-dark and tattered where gunfire took advantage of the momentary weakness. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” Dean can be distantly heard saying, as he lays Wilson carefully down on the wet sand. Blood dribbles up over his lips as Wilson tries to speak, still tries not to cry. “Look, it’s not even that bad, okay? It’s not even that bad—”

Castiel looks away.

He has bigger problems on his hands.

There is no way across the shingle until either the wire-cutting team arrive or someone turns up with bangalores. It seems that the posts of the German gunners angle their fire in a way that covers every inch of the beach as far as the shingle, but cannot fire on anyone near the barbed wire, which is good; on the other hand, they’re now left out in the open, exposed to artillery fire.

The rest of the team – those who made it, Dean discounted – skid and drop to their knees in an evenly spread-out line along the embankment either side of Castiel.

“Sir,” Max Miller pants, the nearest to Castiel, “do we have—”

“No,” Castiel cuts in, pre-empting anything Miller could say. “We don’t have anything.” He glances wildly from one side to the other, desperately searching for something they can use for cover for the mortars coming down around them, shaking the ground up like earthquakes, and each one scattering metal confetti sharp enough to rip grown men into ribbons.

“Now what to we do, then, sir?” one of the privates of A Company asks fearfully.

Castiel sets his jaw – there is no way around this. “Now,” he says, “we dig in... and we wait.”

And wait they do. There is nothing else *to* do, except perhaps digging frantically in the dirt with their bare hands to try and find some shelter for themselves.

Oh-eight-hundred hours. In the next wave of LCVPs onto the shore, there are engineers, there are light artillery teams, and – thank God – there are wire-cutters. The blockades are still not blown and the draws are not cleared, but the barbed wire is blown, cut, or otherwise disposed of, and, led by General Cota himself, the men of Companies A and B are able to break through to climb the bluff.

Oh-eight-thirty. Castiel goes first in his little group, but he can’t help twisting back before the embankment to scan the chaos below. Dean is nowhere to be seen. But, then again, they all have jobs to do and Dean is busy doing his. He has people to save, wounds to repair. Castiel, on the other hand, has a platoon to lead.

They join forces with another disorganised half-platoon of soldiers, and they follow the engineers up the rugged slope between draws D-1 and D-3, avoiding mine-tape where it has been diligently lain, and avoiding bodies where the mine tape was not laid quickly enough. At the site of one of the blown mines, Castiel finds an M1 which doesn’t look to be in too bad condition, and it only has the one clip, but he’s glad to have a weapon in his hands.

They climb steadily, running where they’re exposed to snipers and machine-guns, crawling when the scream of light artillery guns rumbles in their ears. They send three-man teams into pillboxes – grenadier, two riflemen – finishing Krauts, taking enemy positions.

Oh-nine-hundred hours. Castiel turns his rifle on another human being and kills for the first time.

Oh-nine-twenty-five. The sun is high in the sky, and halcyon.

They work through the abandoned village of Hamel-au-Prêtre, the fairytale red-roofed buildings that Castiel had seen first arriving upon on the beach - shattered now, as the air corps finally got their shit together – and head in towards Vierville-sur-mer. It's less than a mile up from the beach, but they have to work through defended hedgerows, thick and thorny and higher than a man's head. It seems to Castiel a near-impenetrable labyrinth every step of the way to Vierville, and but they reach their destination with only minor German conflict. Castiel doesn't even come to the end of his one clip of ammunition.

Twelve-hundred hours. Vierville is unoccupied, save for small groups of French civilians who stare, scared and hostile, as the U.S Army rush through and start clearing buildings to secure the village. Once every building has been checked, every possible enemy position, they set about establishing a battalion command post. The 29th infantry divisional headquarters is being set up in a stately home not far south, Chateau de Vaumicel, and so Castiel picks one of the larger houses on the southern side of town, anxious to be close in case he's needed for anything. The title *company commanding officer* is still swirling endlessly around inside his skull and it's heavy, bearing down like a lead weight at the top of his spine.

Fourteen-hundred-twenty hours. There is chaos. There is some misunderstanding somewhere between a radioman and the U.S Naval fleet, because the Vierville church spire suddenly draws fire from the sea, and Castiel and his disorganised band of men have to dash for cover from the falling mortars and chunks of stone. While huddled gracelessly in a ditch, lips forming *please god please not today*, he finds another dusty half-clip of ammunition.

Fifteen-hundred hours. Attempts to establish communications are mostly unsuccessful. Men are badly scattered, and Castiel manages to find a four-platoon radioman, but signal is poor and they get through to two-platoon only briefly, and only for long enough to hear a crackle of Private Pond yelling, *still on the beach – Dog White is not – opening draws – artillery reinforcem—* and then he's gone.

Castiel is just inside one of the houses on the outskirts of Vierville, poring over some photos of the land between Vierville and the beach - especially the ground to the south, where there are at least two German positions that need to be taken care of – when there is a rap on the door-frame. He looks up to see Private Miller standing just outside. "Sir, Major Campbell's outside to see you."

"Thank you." Castiel folds his maps back up, tucking them away into the breast pocket of his combat jacket, grabs his helmet from the floor by his feet, and follows Blake outside to where the regimental S-3 is standing, eyes narrowed, looking out over the defensive positions around the outside of the town. He's heavily built, almost portly, except that Castiel knows he wouldn't have made it this far if he was actually fat, and his pale hair is thin over his scalp. Castiel clears his throat. "Sir, you asked to see me?"

Campbell turns to him and a frown immediately creases his features, his eyes flickering over Castiel sceptically. "I asked to see the CO."

Castiel doesn't react. "I am the CO, sir."

Major Campbell eyes him. "What happened to Captain Milton?"

"Nothing good, sir." He tries not to let it bother him that the Major is so clearly disheartened by Castiel taking over the position. "Will a new CO be found, or—"

“No, you’ll remain in command until further notice. If you’ve made it this far, you should be able to handle it,” Campbell says dismissively. “What’s your name?”

“First Lieutenant Novak, sir.”

“First Lieutenant Novak, the D-1 draw is still unsecured,” Campbell tells him, his voice hard. “Vierville is currently the weakest part of the beachhead; there’s heavy German artillery firing upon the beach and we have men still trying to get inland. I need that draw cleared. How many men do you have?”

Castiel draws himself up taller. “Twenty-three, sir.”

“Twenty-three? Well. Good luck.”

Major Everett’s closing words aren’t particularly confidence-inspiring, but Castiel supposes it’s honest. Only twenty-three men, and less than half of them from his own company… but they don’t have a choice.

They move out to try and outflank it – unsuccessfully. The Germans have heavier weapons and more ammunition and are fixed into a stable position where they can see Castiel’s team approaching. They’re at a stale-mate, neither able to progress, and the sky is starting to grow dark now. Castiel summons the radioman and calls back to the Vierville command post to ask about the possibility of artillery support, but apparently there are tanks on the road between Vierville and St. Laurent who are currently occupying most of the available firepower, and it’s not possible. He hangs up, resigned.

Twenty-hundred hours. There is no movement from the Germans, and

Castiel certainly isn't going to try an offensive manoeuvre now that they have no visibility and little intel on the road ahead. As long as the German position doesn't call in any artillery in the middle of the night, they're both stuck where they are until morning. Castiel refuses to retreat, and so he gives the order to dig in.

He keeps men on defensive positions to the west, towards the German position, and to the east, in case anyone should come looking for them from Vierville, but otherwise everyone gets to digging shell scrapings to sleep in, either with their entrenching tools, if they managed to keep the weight of it with them during the assault, or, in Castiel's case, with their bare hands.

As though it isn't enough that Castiel is in constantly increasing pain with what is more than likely a giant piece of metal stuck into his shoulder, the ground is baked dry and hard, and trying to break through the surface layer without a shovel is agony. Corporal Ash Lowell offers him the use of his entrenching tool, but Castiel declines, saying that he'll borrow it once Ash has finished his own foxhole.

In retrospect, it's a mistake, and Castiel sorely wishes he hadn't tried to be selfless. He can feel the muscles in his arms starting to give out, his injured shoulder in particular screaming to be allowed to rest. He is just beginning to consider whether they'd be safe enough at this stage just lying flat in the middle of the road, when he sees a group of unfamiliar figures heading up towards them from the Vierville road. They are barely more than silhouettes, and Castiel pays them little mind; they wouldn't have got through Vierville if they were enemy, and it's the sentry's duty to take care of them.

"Halt – advance one for recognition," Lance Corporal Doe, on sentry, can be heard speaking quietly to those approaching. He reels off the password they'd agreed on prior to embarking on the LCVPs, in case of separation. "Victor yoke."

"Tare item. Christ, that was a fucking day and a half, huh?"

Castiel looks up so sharply that the muscles in his shoulders pull tight and pain sears white-hot through his back and left arm. His vision blurs for a second or two, so that he can't see the silhouettes to check, but he would know Dean Winchester's voice anywhere.

He watches as Doe tilts his flashlight beam over the men gathered at the edge of their camp, to check their numbers and that no enemy have slipped unnoticed in their numbers while they were patrolling down, and something lightens in Castiel's chest as he sees the dull glow fall, sure enough, on Dean.

"Alright," Doe says, at last, and he waves a hand to let them through. "Keep your voices down and go report to Lieutenant Novak."

The soldiers pick their way carefully through the half-completed shell scrapings and line up in front of Castiel; he stands to greet them. "Evening, gentlemen," he says tiredly. "Are you alright?"

A few of them exchange glances and dark chuckles, but the general consensus is, *not too bad – can't complain.* They shrug their shoulders, readjust their weapons in their arms, and ask what's going on. Castiel explains the objective, the position they're holding now, and tells them to go ahead and dig in until the morning – oh-three-thirty hours reveille. At that point, they all turn away, except for one.

Castiel looks at Dean. "What do you want?" he asks, trying for disinterested, but he can't hold back the tiny twist of a smile that breaks out on his lips.

Dean nods appraisingly, his own smile stretching wider in response. "Well, damn," he says, leaning on one leg. "Correct me if I'm wrong, sir, but you actually look glad to see me."

Of course Dean was going to be an asshole about it. Of course. Castiel huffs out a short laugh, shaking his head. “You’re a pain in my ass, Winchester,” he admits, “but you’re also a good guy – an even better medic – and a lot of people didn’t make it off that beach, so...” He trails off, meeting Dean’s eyes again, and shrugs. “Yeah. I’m glad to see you.”

Dean full-out grins at that, and he pushes his hands into the pockets of his pants, rocking back on his heels giddily. His chinstrap of his helmet is unclipped and it slides down over his eyes. “See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” he says, tipping his chin up so that he can see past the brim of his helmet. “I’m not so bad – once you get past the devilish good looks and all.”

Castiel squints at him. “You need to adjust your helmet sizing,” he tells him, refusing to pander to his stupid games. “I don’t know how it possibly couldn’t fit you with such a big head, but I suppose God moves in mysterious ways. And *dig in*. I won’t be allowing you any beauty sleep tomorrow morning, so you’d better get settled down.”

“Yes, sir.” Dean pulls one hand out of his pocket to readjust his helmet and starts to turn away – but then he pauses and spins back, digging in his pocket. “Uh – do you want this?” He comes up with an entrenching tool, and to Castiel, whose hands are caked with dirt and coming up with blisters from trying to dig a foxhole with his bare hands, it’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen. “I found a spare one on the beach.”

Castiel stares at him, mouth slightly open, and at that moment he’s so grateful he thinks he could kiss him. Then he remembers himself, and he’s nodding numbly. “Yes,” he says stiltedly, stumbling over his own tongue now that he’s accidentally let in the thought of pressing in close to Dean, crushing their mouths together, licking heatedly over his teeth and tongue— “Thank you.” He takes the entrenching tool from Dean’s hand.

Digging goes much more smoothly now, and he manages to get his shell scraping finished to an acceptable standard, albeit shallowly, in under half an hour.

By this time, almost every single man not on duty is wiped out fast asleep in their own scrapings, aside from Sergeant Barnes, to whom Castiel gave the task of writing up the company's assault report and losses, and Dean, busy reorganising his musette-bag of medical supplies.

Castiel watches him for a moment before heaving himself to his feet, and he crosses quietly to Dean.

Dean looks up as Castiel approaches, and smiles tiredly. "Evenin', lieutenant."

"Sergeant," Castiel greets. His eyes flicker over the products that Dean is rearranging in his med-kit, and it does look like Dean is doing something useful, he'll admit. He removes his helmet – grunting as he does so, as pain courses in all directions from his wounded shoulder. "You - *Jesus* – ow – you should get some sleep."

Dean doesn't answer; his eyes are fixed on him, his expression for once completely serious.

Castiel shifts uncomfortably. "What?"

"Back on the beach," Dean says, setting down his equipment, "you got hit, right?"

Castiel stares back at him, defensive. “A lot of people got hit,” he says flatly.

“A lot of people also died,” Dean points out, rolling his eyes. He folds his arms. “Refusing help doesn’t make you a better officer, you know. It just makes you stupid.”

“It’s fine, I swear,” Castiel says gruffly. “Just a piece of goddamn shrapnel. Doesn’t even hurt.”

Dean stares him down, eyebrows slightly lifted in disbelief. “Bullshit.” He gestures for Castiel to come closer, but his hand freezes in mid-air when Castiel fixes a dark glare on him.

“I’m not going to back to England because of a shitty piece of metal in my shoulder,” Castiel tells him, jaw set.

“I’m not trying to send you back to England here,” Dean says. “Christ, relax. No-one gets sent back to England for a wound like that. I’m just trying to stop you from getting goddamn septicaemia – which, by the way, will *definitely* get you sent back to England.” He doesn’t wait for any further sign of confirmation; he hoists his medical kit in his arms and to clear some space in his scraping for Castiel to sit, who begrudgingly steps down into the space, sits, and turns his back towards him.

Castiel shrugs off his combat jacket, and sits quiet and expectant for a minute or so as Dean searches through the contents of his musette bag. There is a moment of awkward shuffling as Dean twists around and shuffles in close behind Castiel to do his work, clicking a small white headlamp on. Then it starts. There is a gentle, insistent tugging sensation at Castiel’s shoulder-blade as Dean peels the fabric of the t-shirt away from the wound, growing ever more painful until at last there is a sharp yank – Castiel hisses in through his teeth. “Jesus, what

are you—”

“Quit whining – I haven’t even started yet,” comes Dean’s disembodied voice. He pulls on the hem of Castiel’s t-shirt. “Off.”

Staring determinedly ahead as though by solemnity he can somehow nullify the heat searing up in his cheeks, Castiel lifts his shirt off – all by himself, stubbornly, despite Dean’s attempts to help him where the pain in his shoulder won’t let him twist his arms out of the sleeves. The night air is a chill on his skin, but Dean’s hands are warm.

“Now, sir, can I save my morphine for someone else, or are you going to be a little bitch?” Dean says, his voice low, humorous, and much closer to Castiel’s ear than he had expected.

Castiel swallows, his throat sticking; his hands curl into the material of his combat pants and grip tight. “Save it.”

Dean digs in deep.

Castiel clamps his lips tight together, doesn’t let a sound out even as he can feel blood trickle down his bare back, and the metal shifting under his skin. The pain hits him in waves, second by second; Castiel closes his eyes and tucks his chin down into his chest, gritting his teeth against the heavy pulsing ache of it.

After what seems like a lifetime, there is a thump as Dean drops something to the ground, and the pain in Castiel’s shoulder eases infinitesimally. He sags with relief, leaning back into the warm solace of Dean’s hand on his spine. “You done?” he asks wearily.

“Nearly,” Dean replies, his voice muffled as though he’s holding something in his mouth. “Hold on.” There is the snip and crinkle of a packet of sulfa powder being opened – the faint rustle of bandages being unrolled – the squeak of tape - and only then, as Dean is carefully smoothing the tape over Castiel’s skin, sticking tight, does he say, “There. Good as new, sir.”

For a few seconds, Castiel remains still, just breathing slow and steady as the pain in his shoulder recedes. As Dean can be heard rustling around his musette bag, putting away his supplies, Castiel tries flexing the hand of that injured arm, curling his fingers, tensing the muscles in his bicep – it all hurts, but it’s better, and it’ll do.

“Thank you, Winchester,” Castiel says, twisting to look back over his shoulder at him, and then is suddenly floored by the realisation that, in order to access the wounded shoulder during his operations, Dean is sitting right behind Castiel – and so Castiel turns back to look at him – and so Dean glances up to accept the expression of gratitude – and so they find themselves pressed tight and close, the side of Castiel’s bare arm flat against Dean’s chest, and their faces so close that if Castiel turned his face just a little further to the left, their noses would touch.

The headlamp is glaringly bright in Castiel’s eyes, but its harsh white light casts Dean’s skin pale beneath the blood and grime, his eyes yellow-flecked in the greenness, long eyelashes lightening at the ends. There’s a smell on his skin besides sweat and saltwater that leaves Castiel dry-mouthed; under the headlamp’s band, his hair is unkempt, helmet-flattened; he has freckles.

After a long pause, Dean says quietly, “You’re welcome,” and his breath rushes warm over Castiel’s mouth.

Parted lips pressing dryly together, the dull sound of Castiel swallowing seems incredibly loud in the silence that has fallen over them. The space between them is almost thick enough to taste, open-

mouthed. Had Castiel any sense of internal reasoning, he surely would have had some voice in the back of his head shouting, *don't do it don't do it don't don't don't,* but, as it is, there is nothing to be heard at all except for the soft hush of their breathing, and Castiel's eyes flicker slowly lower. Snagging on the blood caked on the side of Dean's nose, the smear of dirt over his cheek.

His eyes fall shamelessly, at last, to Dean's mouth.

They stop breathing.

Heavy-lidded, lips numb, Castiel's eyes drift up slowly back to meet Dean's – and find him staring back wide-eyed. The expression in his eyes is devastating, all fear and heat and, more than anything else, this overwhelming softness like hope or longing, so fierce and intense that if Castiel had breath left in his lungs, it would all be snatched away from him.

That's when he realises what is actually happening.

Castiel tears his eyes away from Dean, snaps his head back to face the front fast enough to get whiplash, and he breathes, one long, shaky exhalation. His heart is beating impossibly fast in his chest. At his back, Castiel faintly feels Dean let out the same pent-up breath - probably the same air. Castiel swallows hard and tries to ignore the sensation of that breath whispering over his bare shoulders. His hands are shaking.

"Thank you, sergeant," Castiel says – realising a split-second too late that he's already said that, idiotically repeating himself – and his voice is rough, scratched like cigarette smoke.

Dean doesn't answer. Castiel can hear him breathing; the sound is

unsteady.

Castiel stands up in one jerky movement, his limbs clumsy. Heart still thundering like an air-strike, he lifts his arms and slips back into his T-shirt, then shrugging into his combat jacket. He wrestles the zip up halfway, retrieves his helmet from the bottom of the shell scraping, and returns to his own without looking back.

7th June, 1944

The next morning, Castiel is awoken by Private Blake crouching beside him, carefully shaking his shoulder. Unfortunately, it's the injured shoulder, and so Castiel is instantly awake, groaning as pain shoots up through his arm. He sits up, knuckling at his eyes.

"Morning, sir," Blake whispers sheepishly, looking nervous at having had to be the one to wake up their platoon leader - no – shit, make that company commanding officer – and then straightens up. "Corporal Mills is still on stag, sir. He's on the second hour of his rota."

"Get someone else to relieve him," Castiel says blearily. He checks his watch: nearly oh-four-hundred hours. "You get back on duty though. And tell Mills to fill in his foxhole."

As Blake nods and hurries off, Castiel begins the struggle up onto his feet. He's stiff from sleeping in the dirt and his shoulder is a pounding ache that travels all the way up to his head with every movement, but he tries to work past it, moving gingerly as he shrugs into what equipment he could recover after the disastrous near-drowning at Omaha. His unloaded rifle is dusty, but seems to be functioning, as he

quickly tests the bolt and safety. He then heads over to wake up Sergeant Milligan, who, in turn, will awaken the rest of the group.

The soldiers are up as fast as they can, roused by ten past and eating cold rations out of the foil bags – no time to heat them, and fearful of the attention that the bright glow of firelight might bring from the enemy positions. Castiel doesn't eat anything. His stomach is curled too tight with anxiety to even think about breakfast.

Yesterday, the title of commanding officer had been thrust upon him out of nowhere, so it wouldn't have been entirely unexpected if he had made mistakes or lost some of his men along the way; he was new to the role, and there was a great deal of pressure, and in spite of already being a platoon commander, he was, for the most part, unprepared. Now, however, in the space of less than twenty-four-hours, he is expected to lead his men through an assault of his own design, claiming three important German gunner positions in the process. To say that it's nerve-wracking would be an understatement.

Instead, his hands itch for a smoke. He squats to sit on his own heels, perched birdlike at the edge of the road, with his knees pulled up close to his body in order to keep warm in the pre-dawn chill, and fumbles in the breast pocket of his combat jacket for his cigarette tin. In the sunless cold, his fingers are numb. He struggles, first with the tin and then with his lighter, and is so busy muttering vague, helpless obscenities under his breath that he doesn't notice the long shadow that comes to stand over him, blocking out what thin haze of early blue light has filtered through the trees, until Dean says, "Need a hand there, sir?"

Castiel glances up, but with the light behind him, Dean is no more than a silhouette – broad at the shoulders, loose-limbed, and with his helmet cocked at a recognisably obnoxious angle. Castiel looks away and focuses his attention back on his lighter. "I've been lighting my own cigarettes for longer than you've been old enough to buy them," he mutters, grouchy with the early hour and the cold seeping all through his bones like water through dry soil.

“You wouldn’t know it to see you, sir,” Dean comments, his tone amused in a way that falls just dangerously close to patronising, and Castiel is about to snap back at him when he drops to his knees, level with Castiel, and reaches out – without asking – to take the end of Castiel’s cigarette neatly between his index and middle fingers, just ahead of Castiel’s own loose grip on the rolled paper. He is still cast all in darkness, but there is the line of his nose, the pale light highlighting the back hinges of his jaw, and without a word, Castiel lets Dean pluck his lighter from his hand and light his cigarette.

Dean’s hands are warm on Castiel’s skin, and deft, moving with surgical dexterity and precision. He flicks the light on, holds it to Castiel’s cigarette, and waits. At this proximity, the dim flicker of the flame is enough to briefly illuminate the details of Dean’s face, and Castiel sees that Dean is watching him carefully – as though prodding him to see how he’ll react. Like he’s come to some kind of hypothesis somewhere, and here he is now to test his theory.

Castiel sucks in his breath, slow and deep, eyes never leaving Dean’s face, and the tip of the cigarette smoulders brighter for a second before settling to a steady burn. He keeps the smoke in his lungs as possible, letting it sting and crackle inside him like a fan to soft kindling, waiting until he’s all filled up with it, up to the brim with fire.

Dean swallows.

Castiel exhales, chest deflating as though he’s been physically hollowed, abdomen to clavicles, and smoke rushes out to twist through and tangle between their fingers until their hands are indistinguishable, one from the other.

Dean lets out a short, rough breath, as though he had been unconsciously holding his breath with Castiel. He lets his hand fall

away from Castiel. “There you go,” he says, and there’s a hoarse edge to his voice that Castiel couldn’t be sure was there before. Dean stands quickly, dusts off his knees with brisk movements, and unceremoniously thrusts Castiel’s lighter back towards him. “And here. Your lighter. Lieutenant.”

Castiel takes it from him. “Thank you.” He pinches his cigarette between his teeth while he stashes it back in his pocket, and when he looks up, Dean is gone. At a distance, the morning light is still too sparse to differentiate him from the other men, let alone to try to deduce somehow the reason for his behaviour, or his reactions to an unmitigated and altogether bizarre interaction, so he ducks his head low and takes another long drag.

It’s time for the offensive.

By oh-four-thirty, the men are packed up, having eaten, and are ready for a quick briefing on the plan of the morning. From what they saw yesterday, the German position is fairly simple – one medium-sized concrete pillbox with one internal cannon, trenches encircling it for defence – and although it isn’t exactly textbook, Castiel doesn’t think the assault will be too complicated. Hopefully they can take the Germans by surprise. None of the men have any questions, so there’s nothing else to wait for.

With his heart beating like a bird in his chest, Castiel shoulders his rifle sling and heads out to take his tiny, fragmented company out on his first exercise in command.

They patrol staggered in the thin grey light of dawn, weapons in hand, and move out down the road towards the enemy. There are five German strongholds between here and the beach, making it the best-defended part of the Omaha beachhead, but for now Castiel is looking to try and take the one nearest to Vierville – coincidentally, also the one overlooking the D-1 draw down onto the beach.. It should be fun.

As they walk, Castiel is so engrossed in running over the plan in his head that it takes him a good few minutes to notice who he's walking behind. It's hard to see anything of Dean past the bulk of his equipment, but Castiel can recognise the long curve of his legs, and the Red Cross stamped on his haversack makes for pretty clear confirmation.

"Winchester, you're not going in with the rifle team," Castiel says, keeping his voice low. "Drop to the back."

"Yes, sir." Dean steps out to one side to wait until the rest of the patrol has passed him; he doesn't look at Castiel.

Some two hundred yards or so from the position, Castiel sets down his almost-platoon behind a barn to organise a plan, peering around the corner. They're much closer now, and in the light of day, Castiel can see that the trench system is basic, one large semi-circle around the pillbox, broken only in places by small gunner posts. He can't see a door into the pillbox, and assumes it must be around the other side.

"Right." He swivels back, crouching in the dirt, and leans against the wall of the barn as he looks out at the faces of the NCOs gathered around him. "Milligan. See that tree-line, far-left of axis?"

"Seen."

"I want one team of gunners set down there, and I want you to get another team around the other side of the pillbox. Heavy oppressive fire – I want you to keep their heads down while we get the riflemen into position. Actually – take Miller and Doe with you, try to get some shots into the pillbox. Radiomen and medics with the first team of gunners until otherwise called for. Montgomery, there's a ditch along

the side of the road nearest to us, heading all the way down into the draw. Don't go that far down, but I want men spread along that line, mortars on the trenches and switch fire when you see the gunners doing so. Remember – *only* the trenches – the gun is not your problem, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Rifle-teams left flanking behind the gunners, all the way to the back of the pillbox, and then I want you to split. The trench is essentially a U-shape so we can get enfilading fire – work from the top and meet in the middle. Quentin, take the left-hand side; Lafitte, you're on right. Just... don't shoot each other. Grenades in first if you've got them. We've got to move fast – we can't risk reinforcements being called in from the other positions. Any questions?"

Corporal Mills raises a fist. "Sir, what about the gun, then?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it." Castiel glances around them. "Anything else? No? Okay, move out."

They move. Every man has been briefed on what he's doing and now it's their turn to act. It's nearing oh-four-thirty hours and as the sky grows ever brighter, the chances of the German being awake and active increase. Castiel is painfully conscious that, due to the lateness of their attempts at assault last night and the consequent lack of visibility, he has very little intel; he has no idea how many Germans will be defending this position, nor what weapons they're carrying. He supposes they're about to find out.

Pausing to remind Corporal Montgomery not to start laying down mortar fire until after the gunners are in position, Castiel drops off the artillery team and runs after the other men, who are already disappearing into the trees. There is low shrubbery, coarse and spiky,

which will be good for cover, but it means that the men are slow-moving, their boots an endless crunching through the undergrowth. In his peripheral vision, Castiel is aware of movement in the trenches.

The early-morning tranquillity is shattered by a shout – a short, ugly word that Castiel doesn't understand – and then, immediately afterwards, a sharp, echoing crack. Then again, again, again, as the alarm is raised and the Germans realise what's happening and they scramble to their defensive positions.

Shit. So much for the goddamned element of surprise.

"Come on, come on," Castiel urges under his breath; he's running behind the machine-gunners, who aren't yet in nearly a good enough position to efficiently cover the trenches, but the rifle-teams are far ahead by now and are nearing the stage at which they would need to break out from the tree-line. They're running out of time to give covering fire, fast. "Here," he yells, sharp hand gestures slicing towards the ground. "Mills, take the rest of them round!"

And then men are dropping to the ground, shimmying into position amongst the bushes and bracken – snapping LSW tripods open, uncurling bullet-belts from draped over their shoulders – while the other half of them head in the same direction as the rifle-teams, to flank and give covering fire from the other side. Castiel drops a crouch beside one of the privates, fits his rifle to his shoulder and spends a second trying to help the sharpshooters firing at the pillbox. Inhale. Exhale slowly. Hold. *Crack.* There's no way of telling if he hit anything; it's too fucking dark inside the bunker and there's only occasional flashes of metal glinting from within when a Kraut shifts the angle of his weapon.

The gunners have barely been firing five seconds before there is the hollow thud of one of the 60mms being fired, then – one second, two seconds, three – preceded only by a low whistle, it hits, deep in one corner of the trenches, and there is an earth-shaking firework display

of smoke and dirt. Then once more, and again after that, until the sound of German shouts are drowned out by the slow, heavy thump and explosive spray of mortars and the rattlesnake chatter of machine-gun fire.

That isn't to say that the Germans are going down without a fight; their rounds cut close enough to the position of Castiel's gunners that the hedgerows in which they find themselves entangled shudder around them, and splinters are cut jagged from the trees around them, flying in their faces. They're getting accurate enough now that Castiel has to lower his rifle and press in behind a nearby tree. He tries to peer around at the progress being made by the other teams – has to quickly duck back when bullets start hammering on his tree anew, leaves and woodchips scattering – and then, clutching his helmet tightly onto his head, peeks out again.

There they are. Led by the teams' grenadiers, one of whom does a hop-skip-and-hurl like he's trying out for Little League, the rifle-teams sprint out for the trenches. A pause of two beats and then the grenades go off, scattering earth and blood where it lands, and then the men are dropping down into the German space, the sound of their fire a juddering clatter, high *ping* when someone's clip snaps off empty. They disappear almost out of sight, ally and enemy nearly indistinguishable with only the top of their helmets exposed as they duck low, and Castiel guts twists anxiously at having his men out of sight.

He twists back around, levels his rifle and squeezes off another two shots – snaps some German's head back cleanly, dark red hole sliced through the nose, and the other goes wide on a moving target – and then yells for the attention of his gunners. "Milligan," he tries first, but is lost in the noise. "Milligan!"

Milligan looks up, startled. "Sir?"

"Get ready to switch fire," Castiel shouts. He gestures at the others at

Sergeant Milligan's side who are still firing, oblivious and unable to hear Castiel over the sound of their own gunfire, and he tries to indicate that the message needs to passed on. Once satisfied that his order has been understood, he gets to his feet, keeping bent low, and starts running to follow the path already tread by the rest of his team.

Then, as he's nearing the edge of the tree-line, from deep within the chaos and smoke of the trenches there comes a strangled yell, the tone and pitch of it very familiar, and Castiel knows that someone's been hit badly. It's surreal, but time does not stop; the on-going battle doesn't care about one man, and Castiel is conscious of running some four or five more steps through the undergrowth, his heartbeat thundering in his ears, before reality seems to catch up and there is the long yell of, "*Medic*!"

Castiel can hear crashing behind him as Dean takes off running, but he's preoccupied and they're heading in opposite directions and there isn't time to think. Dean has a job to do and so does Castiel – and with that thought, Castiel breaks out of the trees. His toe catches on the brush tangling out from the roots of the trees and he trips, but then he pushes himself into a sprint, pushes himself breathless with his muscles screaming, the howl of bullets at his heels and the hissing thud of them burying themselves deep into the dirt pushing him faster; it's a strange mixture, all to the soundtrack of rattling guns and the solid rocking bass-drum of the German's Howitzer finally rumbling into action.

He skids on the short grass trying to stop as he nears the defilade where the other team of gunners are set up, and drops to his knees beside them. "Prepare to switch fire left," he yells over them, pointing with a flat hand back in the direction of the draw. "Reznik, I want you coming with me ready to get into that pillbox."

Reznik nods, lifting his elbows from the dirt to start clicking the shoulder-support of his grease gun back into place.

“Sir, we’re getting real low on ammo,” shouts one of the privates working to feed the bullet belt into one of the M2s. “Any chance of a little more?”

Castiel glances at him, and, shit, sure enough, there is very little of the belt left curled beneath his hands. “Give me your bandoliers,” he says, reaching out and snatching the long straps from their shoulders almost before they’ve had the chance to shrug out of them. He loops them loosely over his own shoulder, catching on his rifle sling. “And switch to deliberate fire. I’ll send a runner around in a second.”

Then, without further ado, he slaps Reznik on the shoulder to let him know that he’s moving out, scrambles up to his feet, and heads out for the nearest entrance to the trench. They run – the Germans’ efforts are concentrated on the defensive now, and most likely in a different direction, focusing on the soldiers who are currently overthrowing their trenches, but that’s not to say that no-one could pull off a quick shot on two fumbling late-comers as they move across the grass.

Down in the dirt, it’s chaos. Smoke curls up loosely from the ground, left hot and cracked from shell fire, and grass and dirt are floating in the very air, filling Castiel’s mouth with every breath. He ducks down, stays low, and hurries through; he steps quickly over the slumped bodies of the Krauts who went down first, his collected bandoliers banging and clattering where they swing from his shoulder.

He grabs the arm of the first guy he comes across – one Private Gideon - pulls him backwards, tips the bandoliers off into his arms and yells, “Ammo run – head for the treeline. Prioritise the gunners and then come back.” He uses the hand twisted into Gideon’s jacket to jerk him closer when he tries to immediately run off and follow his orders. “Give me your clips.”

Gideon’s free hand flies to his webbing, sharp deft movements like they’d practiced in England endless times, pulls his spare clips out of the pockets and thrusts them into Castiel’s hands. Only then does

Castiel let him go, and uses a hard shove to the small of his back to help him out of the trench, and he's gone.

Castiel twists back to glance behind him; Reznik is still waiting. Castiel throws him a clip, and he catches it, and they push on forwards.

The trench is cut into a zigzag to provide enfilade from fire at either end, for which Castiel is extremely grateful when a grenade lands with a dull noise in the soil by his feet. He has barely time to yell a warning and press himself flat into the dirt wall where it cuts away, before it goes off with a spray of earth and an echoing bang. He kneels, snaps the safety off his rifle, aims – but the smoke is too thick to decipher his men from theirs, so he clicks safety back on and hurries on to the next corner. There he finds Dean, knelt in the dirt over the crumpled body of one of their men, who groans something obscene as Dean works. Castiel doesn't have time to stop and see the who or what of it, but slaps an encouraging hand to Dean's shoulder as he passes.

Up ahead, there is a small cluster of soldiers pressed in behind one of the corners cut into the trench to avoid the fire coming back at them, and Castiel ducks low to run in behind them.

"Quentin," he yells over the chatter and boom of the fire-fight. "*Quentin!*" He grabs a handful of the corporal's jacket and yanks hard for his attention.

Quentin looks back. "Sir?"

"Over there – the next cut in the trench – can you see it?" Castiel says, pointing down the line. "You'll have perfect defilade over the top, all the way down until the far corner, but get some grenades in there first to clear it out, and have men ready to provide covering fire."

Quentin hesitates. “Yes, sir.”

“And hurry up – I’m going to tell the other squad to drop back and wait for you to push through,” Castiel adds. He shifts his rifle, shuffles out until he has a clear line of sight down the trench, and lets loose a few shots to keep the Krauts suppressed while Quentin twists back to address the men bunched in behind him and tell them their next move.

The crack of the rounds is sharp in his ears, almost painful; he flattens his tongue over his teeth and focuses on his marksmanship principles. Inhale, hold. One, two. Squeeze – don’t flinch – hold and exhale. He sees a man go down backwards into a wall with a thud and a reflexive trigger-squeeze that releases a spray of bullets in all directions – and then there is a hissing crack that snaps Castiel’s head back hard, and when his vision clears he finds himself knocked back onto the ground.

“Shit,” he says aloud, but that’s all the time he has to process what just happened because Private Bradbury is suddenly shoving his helmet – complete with rifle round buried an inch deep in the metal at the front – back into his hands and hauling him up onto his feet.

“You okay there, sir?” he shouts.

“I’m fine – you – you help Winchester move the casualty out to the tree-line, whenever he’s ready,” he says, still dazed, and he turns back the way he came. “Reznik?”

“Sir.” Reznik appears out of the smoke and dust, breathlessly clutching his grease-gun like a lifeline. “Where to now?”

Castiel gestures back towards the exit of the trench. “Out,” he yells. “The other end of the trench, ‘round the back of the pillbox. Actually – no – scrap that. I’m heading for the other end, you go back to where we dropped the first gunner group, get them ready to switch fire, and Corporal Doe and Sergeant Milligan ready to move. I’ll catch up in a second.”

Reznik hitches the straps of his haversack higher up and sets off running without another moment spared for further instruction, Castiel just behind him as they weave back up the jagged line of the trench until it starts to slope up back to grass. Then Reznik pushes himself into a sprint across the open ground while Castiel ducks low to avoid the open slats of the pillbox and runs around the back for the other end of the trench.

As he heads back into the smoke, he is confronted by the sight of the second rifle-squad having made significantly less progress . They are scattered, pinned against the walls as they try to keep out of the way of the rattling machine-gun set up at the internal curve of the trench, which would pick them off cleanly if they emerged from their cover for more than a split-second. Castiel holds onto the edge of his helmet, not having had time to re-buckle the clip after it was knocked off his head, and zigzags fast down as far as he can – he can see Corporal Lafitte tucked against the wall near the front of the squad, and he nearly reaches him, but then there is a chatter of bullets thundering the dirt walls around him and he throws himself hard out of the way. His injured shoulder slams into the wall, pain jolting down his arm so sharp that for a second his vision whites out, and when it clears he’s crouching, his back against the wall, with his teeth buried in his bottom lip hard enough that he can taste blood. He exhales heavily.

“Lafitte,” he yells, and twists his head sideways to try and see if he’s even being heard. He thinks that if ever there was a time when he would’ve liked to have more than one radioman available, it would be now. “Lafitte, drop back! Goddamnit – Lafitte!”

Ahead of him, he sees Lafitte’s head lift, tilt a little like he’s trying to work out if he imagined it, and then he looks back. Castiel warily lifts

a hand so that it can be seen, praying it isn't cleanly removed by the Germans unleashing another round of bullets down the trench, and he makes the signal for the squad to pull back. Then he lifts his rifle and clicks the safety off, to indicate that he'll give suppressive fire when they move.

Lafitte gives a curt nod, and then he hoists his rifle up, ready to run. Castiel turns halfway back to Privates Spruce, Tran, and Chambers, wedged into the wall opposite, a few feet back from him. "Prepare to give covering fire," he yells. He looks forwards again, tilts his body a little away from the wall for better line of sight down the trench – and then, with a slap to the shoulder of the man beside him and a short command that Castiel can't decipher, Lafitte is up and running.

Castiel lets off a volley of shots that crack over their heads as they run, and then, once they're past, switches fire to actually try and hurt one of them, but the German gunner is not intimidated and lets out another deafening rattle that has them all pressed back against the walls.

"Pairs fire and manoeuvre back to the previous corner - Chambers, you're with me," he shouts across to the guys on the other side of the trench. "Ready to move?"

Kris Chambers gives a short nod, eyes narrowing.

"*Move*!"

Castiel hitches his rifle up and sprints, pushing himself hard enough that the muscles in the backs of his calves sting, and when he reaches the corner he crashes down into a crouch that leaves him skidding unsteadily across the dirt, rocks tearing up his knees through his combats, and he snaps his rifle up into his shoulder. "Move!"

Somehow, through all the smoke and chaos, Castiel sees that he clips the gunner's arm, sends a splash of blood out back against the guy feeding the bullets in, but otherwise doesn't do much. Once Spruce and Tran come running in, Castiel orders two other privates to take over suppressing the enemy while he fills in Lafitte on what's happening next. Lafitte's squad is to stay here, progress no further down the trench, but hold their ground – they must not allow themselves to be pushed any further back. Suppress the Germans while squad two clear them out from the other side. Stay put to grab any stragglers trying to escape down this end. Shouldn't be too complicated.

"Are we clear?" Castiel asks.

Laffite nods. "Yes, sir."

Castiel glances around the men. "I want two riflemen for the pillbox assault team."

"Chambers and Rourke." Lafitte points at them, beckons them over, and they come darting across the exposed space to press into the corner next to where Castiel and Laffite are knelt. "You two are heading over with the lieutenant to take the pillbox," Lafitte tells them, tipping the brim of his helmet up with one knuckle. "Get some extra clips from the others if you need 'em – I want you to have at least four each, you hear?"

They scatter to reorganise their ammunition; as Castiel waits, he asks Lafitte if anyone in his squad have grenades or Comp B. Lafitte digs a wedge of the explosive out of the back pocket of his webbing and passes it over, with the apology that they used all their grenades coming into the trench. By then, the others are ready and Castiel leads them out. They cross paths with Private Gideon running back to the second gunner team, slow and lopsided as his musette bag jangles by

his leg with every step, heavy with replacement ammunition, but there's no time for so much as a nod of acknowledgement and they have to move on.

It's not far to the tree-line now – just another few paces – but still there are bullets hissing into the dirt around their feet, zinging into the tree trunks up ahead that hit them with a spray of dry, summer-cracked bark splinters so that they have to duck their heads low. Then they're under cover, stumbling over roots and low shrubbery as they weave and pick their way back to the gunners.

Castiel pushes ahead. "Switch fire," he calls out, his heart thunderous in his ribcage even as the words leave his mouth – because once the gunners switch, the mortar team will stop firing, which in turn means a decrease in suppressive action on the pillbox, which means that the Howitzer has clear sight to take out all three teams, and the Germans riflemen can fire more effectively down into their town trenches. It means they have to move fast. "Milligan – Doe – Reznik – on me!"

There is a scramble as the two NCOs extricate themselves from the tangle of hedges in which they'd hidden and come up to kneel beside Castiel, clicking new clips into their rifles. Milligan comes to meet them, dropping to rest on one knee for the others to fall in behind him in formation – Lance Corporal Doe just behind him, and thankfully, Doe has two grenades tucked into his jacket; the others fall in at the rear.

"I want you in and out as fast as you can," Castiel says. "We need that pillbox taken before it takes out our artillery, and if there's any radiomen calling for help, they'll be in there too, and we need them cut off. Take out the gun and then get out – head for the wood-line past the second gunner team. Clear? The entrance is around the front of the pillbox, just above the trenches, but Quentin's squad should have cleared it by now." He glances around at them all. They're fast and they know their drills – they should be fine, he tells himself. Feeling his chest constrict anxiously, he clears his throat, tightens his fingers on the stock of his rifle so he can't fidget with indecision. "Move out."

He goes with them as far as the pillbox and then takes off running for the second gunner team, where Private Gideon is unloading the contents of his musette bag into their hands. “Switch fire,” he yells as he comes in towards them, stumbling on the uneven turf as he slows down to drop onto one knee beside them. “Switch right, across behind the pillbox!” That’s all the time he can spend on them, and without even pausing to catch his breath, he drags himself back onto his adrenaline-shaky feet and takes off through the trees in the direction of the mortar-team with the thought that, god, he could *really* do with another radioman.

As he takes off across the open ground, he is already acutely aware of the tonal shift of the gunners’ rounds coming down, now that they’ve changed the direction of their fire, and he hopes it isn’t something the Germans pick up on too soon. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Dean and Private Bradbury – recognisable by the curve of one’s legs, the bright shock of hair under the helmet of the other – jogging awkwardly away towards the woods, the combats-clad body of the trench casualty hung loosely between them as they move him to safety. Then Castiel’s coming over the crest at the edge of the clearing, where the ground dips away to give way to the main round, on the other side of which the mortar team are tucked into several small hollows in the ground with the look of shell craters or the marks left behind by a vehicle which settled in one place for too long.

“Sir,” Corporal Montgomery calls out as Castiel comes over, “we’ve held our fire – do you want us to—”

“Move out,” Castiel shouts over him, and as he skids to a halt he drops down heavily to sit beside Montgomery in one of the hollows, his back pressed against the upwards curve of the dirt. He takes a second to drag in deep, gulping breaths, his chest heaving with exertion. “Far right of axis – past the gunners – into the wood-line. Take up a defensive position and—”

At that moment, there is a long, shrill whistle, a raw scream of

"*Incoming!",* and all conversation is cut off as they duck low into their cover and curl up tight – the words, *not today, not now, not like this* a desperate echo in Castiel's head as he flattens himself against the soil – and then there is a crash like thunder all through Castiel's bones, dirt lifting like an act of God. He's still alive. He uncurls, exhales shakily.

"Take up a defensive position," he tries again, although he keeps low to the ground now as he speaks, "and wait for the assault team to go through to you. You'll be the re-org point – now pull back!" He lifts himself on his hands, legs underneath him with muscles coiled to spring up and run away as soon as he's ensured that their next task has been understand, and then he gets the *yes, sir,* the clanging as they pack up their guns to move, and that's his cue.

There is another hollow chug, greedy machinery gulping air, and then there is the slam into earth that nearly takes Castiel's legs out from underneath him. A high whine rings in his ears, with an occasional wobbling shift in pitch as he runs, like his skull has been filled with water that sloshes to fill one ear and then the other, so that by the time he has stumbled back to the second gunner position, he is thoroughly disoriented. He drops into a crouch, near-oblivious to the men at his side while he fights to catch his breath and looks towards the pill-box, from where smoke is billowing, accompanied by frantic German yells and the chatter and flash of gunfire through the fog.

"Sir? Lieutenant Novak?"

Castiel looks over to see Montgomery staring expectantly at him with eyebrows raised as though to say, *well, now what?*

"Oh." Castiel takes a deep breath. "Hold your position," Castiel instructs, and he glances up along the gunner line to see how the others are doing for ammunition. Even with Private Gideon's ammo run, they are running dangerously low. "Slow your fire but keep sporadic pressure on, and be ready to re-org past the tree-line. The

mortar team will already be there."

Then, waiting no longer than the handful of seconds needed for Castiel to receive Montgomery's confirmatory grunt of an order understood, he grips the edge of his helmet to keep it steady, hauls himself to his feet, and sets off running for the pill-box.

The entrance is round the front, in full view of the trenches, but there seem to be no more shots bearing up from the dirt, and the movement below suggests that Quentin has pushed through to clear out the last section or so of men before Lafitte, and Castiel makes it to the door unhurt.

When he swings through rifle-first, to clear both corners nearest to the doorway before sweeping to follow the action, he comes in to the sight of a bayonet being buried helm-deep into the chest of one shivering Kraut, while another squawks in frantic German as he climbs down from the mount of the Howitzer with his hands held high. Doe's rifle is trained on his head.

"You speak German, sir?" Doe calls cheerfully without taking his eyes off him.

"I don't need to," Castiel says, with barely a glance towards them. "When we're all clear, march him back to Vierville as a POW and report him to Major Everett." He looks over the rest of the scene; the other men gingerly turn over bodies to check that they're dead, firstly, and also to search for useful information or weapons. Castiel catches Reznik's eye. "Reznik, blow out the Howitzer. The rest of you, I want you to move out to re-org past the tree-line – the mortar-team should already be in position, it shouldn't be too hard to find them. Chambers, hang back. Search all the bodies, here and in the trench, and report any new intel and POWs back to the S-3 with Doe. All clear?"

“Yes, sir.”

Milligan slaps one of the remaining riflemen on the shoulder and leads the way out of the pillbox at a jog, hollering “*Re-org*!” as he goes, and not a second later there’s the clatter of ammunition and equipment as soldiers haul themselves up and into motion en masse. Castiel pauses to root one extra clip out from his pocket and toss it over to Chambers, just in case they run into any trouble searching the trenches, and then heads back out to move with the rest of them.

Castiel drops out to crouch on one side of the mouth of the rest, gestures with a sharp jab of the hand and a yell for the men to follow Sergeant Milligan into the trees, and then hails Corporal Mills over to join him. “Can I borrow some water? Thanks – and do you know where Winchester went with the casualty?” Castiel mutters as he fumbles in the back of Mills’ haversack for his water bottle.

“Hell if I know,” Mills says, tilting sideways a little for ease of access. “I couldn’t see a damned thing down there. I figure the sensible thing to do, though, would be to take him back to the main road, closer to Vierville, in case we had to retreat.”

Castiel tips Mills’ bottle up in a sharp move, catches a mouthful of cold water that tastes of rust and dirt. and passes it back. “Yeah. Do you even know who it was?”

“Private Thomas, I think.” Mills helps him do the buckle up again.

“Shit.” Castiel exhales sharply. “Okay. You send a runner back to find them, see if they need anything, help them get back to Vierville if they can’t make it on their own steam, then tell Winchester to get back here ASAP – he’s the only medic we’ve got right now.”

Mills nods. “Yes, sir.” With that, he’s up and gone.

Castiel takes a second to breathe, and watches the last cluster of his men disappear into the tree-line where Milligan was directed, before he hauls himself to his feet and runs after them.

There are three more pillboxes before the D-1 Vierville draw, each as well-defended as the first, and each one more prepared for combat as word spreads through the German lines that the Americans are coming to clear them out, but they manage to make it through two with relatively few casualties – one Private Johnston killed by mortar-fire, and only two injured, with the exclusion of Private Zeddmore spraining his ankle when he falls into a foxhole. By the time they’re rallying to hit the third, they are perilously low on ammunition, frankly exhausted, and it’s a relief to have their radioman, Harry Spangler, run over to Castiel saying to hold off the last pillbox as Major Campbell is sending the rag-ends of Fox Company to take over.

“Okay,” Castiel says. All his clothes are lined with a thin, cold dew of his sweat, and his injured shoulder has begun to throb painfully in time with his every heartbeat as though it’s determined to make him regret that he survived – and it’s not even oh-nine-hundred yet. He flattens a hand over the crown of his helmet and arches backwards in a long stretch to try and catch his breath. “Okay. Roger that, and tell him we’ll hold our position until Fox get here.”

Private Spangler scrambles away to relay the message back to Vierville. Castiel looks out across his company, currently scattered all about him in all-around defence, some sprawled prone to watch the roads and woods, some kneeling as they take on water or reorganise their ammunition; Private Reznik is hurriedly re-lacing his boots.

Castiel hails over Sergeant Milligan and Corporal Lafitte, as well as Corporal Mills, as an after-thought, and gives them their orders: take three squads respectively to each of the earlier-established rendezvous points from the previous pillboxes, holding those positions until the

arrival of Fox Company, when they could return to Vierville and report to HQ Company about the hand-over of the cleared enemy positions. “Lafitte, you’re on pillbox two,” he says with a short gesture back down the main road, and he glances around the group. “Mills, you’re on the first one. Milligan, you’re with me holding the one we just assaulted – that’s the position they’re most likely to try and retrieve. The squads are shot to pieces but you’ll have to improvise. Work something out amongst yourselves. Any questions?”

A chorus of, “No, sir,” comes back at him, and, satisfied, Castiel nods to send them off to their tasks. They immediately fall to dividing the company into makeshift squads, with only minimal attempts to keep equal levels of gunners, mortars, riflemen, and technicians in each – time is key – before they move out. Milligan reorders the remaining men into a more secure defensive position, pushing them out further into the trees to keep an eye both on the pillbox some fifty metres behind them and every possible route of access for returning Krauts, and in the meantime Castiel finds Private Spangler again to radio back to Vierville the actions being carried out. Then he borrows a map from Milligan, with apologies for his poor admin, what with his own kit being somewhere underwater down at Omaha, and he is just familiarising himself with the routes between Vierville and neighbouring villages, trying to imagine what their next move might be, when he overhears the closest he’s ever encountered to mutiny.

“—don’t get why Novak thinks he’s so goddamned special,” one of the NCOs – one Lance Corporal Quentin – is complaining under his breath. He’s tucked up in a kneeling position behind the gnarled trunk of an old tree, and positioned near enough to the neighbouring tree, where Private Bass is kneeling, that they can talk quietly. “Hell, if Hester knew this guy were ordering us about out of his ass, he’d give him what for, even if the shit he was getting us to do wasn’t totally FUBAR—”

“Was there something you wanted to say to me, Quentin?” Castiel says, tone sharp.

Quentin’s head snaps up, and for a second his cheeks colour with the

realisation that he's been caught. Then, however, he draws himself up tall, lifts his chin so the back of his head leans lazily against the tree-trunk beside him . "Actually, yeah," he says, raising his voice a little. "See, sir, I was just wondering how it was that you got to keep out of all the action while the rest of us are down in the dirt getting our asses torn to shreds. Just wondering."

Castiel tilts his head. Quentin isn't one of Castiel's platoon; he's one of Alistair's, from four-platoon, and Castiel has always had the impression of him as a slimy time-waster, one only ever does the bare minimum that was required of him before giving up for a smoke and a poker game. Castiel has told himself a hundred times to be fair, that it's cruel to make judgements of people based on the little interaction he has with some of them, but in this case it appears his prejudices weren't too far off the mark.

"I would've thought that'd be officer's prerogative," Castiel says, and he looks down at his rifle to adjust where the strap has become twisted, to smooth out the coarse fabric and check that it isn't fraying where it rubs against the metal of the weapon.

"Well, so would I, sir," Quentin says, "but seeing as there were officers and all thrown down in that trench, and you were all too happy to tell us all where to go and stick our necks out like we're getting goddamned apples shot up the tops of your heads, and you're off in the trees minding your own sweet business, I figure maybe you think you're some kind of special case who don't have to fight a regular war like the rest of us."

Castiel doesn't react; he lays his rifle strap flat, scratches a spot of dust from his rifle casing with his fingernail, pinches the material of the front of his combat jacket and adjusts the weight on his shoulders, like he hasn't got time to just stand and listen to complaints without another task at hand. "Is that so?"

"Yeah, that's so." Quentin tips his head forwards in a lazy mockery of

a nod. “*Sir.*”

“And what if I was company commanding officer?” Castiel says, and he lifts his eyes to meet Quentin’s. “Then what?”

Quentin opens his mouth.

Castiel watches him patiently, waiting for a response.

“Sir, I—” Quentin cuts himself off. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Captain Milton got hit on Omaha,” Castiel continues, interrupting any feeble attempt Quentin might have made to excuse himself. He doesn’t bother crossing the distance to Quentin; he rather prefers the idea of belittling him from afar, so that he’s embarrassed in front of the rest of his squad. “So, as it happens, I am company commanding officer. Now, if you’d like to stay to the back of the fire-fight, be my guest. Would you like to run the company, too?”

Face drawn tight like sucking on lemons, Quentin bites out a, “No, sir.”

“Please, I insist. It is, after all, such a safe and luxurious role.”

Quentin drops his head sulkily to stare at the dirt. “No, sir. I’m – sorry. Sir.”

“I thought as much.” Castiel straightens slowly. “Now, seeing as you saw fit to tell me how to do my job, I might take this moment to

advise you as to how you should be doing yours," he says, his voice hard. "Do as you're told."

"Yes, sir."

"Regardless," Castiel goes on, more sharply now, "of whether you think you're smarter than the orders being given, or whether you think the officer giving them isn't worth the shovel it'd take to bury him. Now," he lifts his chin and looks at Quentin down the length of his nose, "is there anything else I can help you with, Corporal?"

"No, sir."

"Then perhaps you'll do me the kindness of looking out for the enemy, instead of using your temporary employment as defence as an excuse to gripe."

Quentin scowls but makes no noise of complaint; he adjusts his rifle in his arms and twists back to face outwards, as does his neighbour. From that point onwards, no sound is made. They lie or kneel in the dirt, waiting and watching. Fortunately for them, it's less than half an hour that Castiel's squad remain in the defensive before Fox Company patrol in to relieve them.

"Hey, Novak," Captain Laufeyson says as he wanders over, leaving his men to wait just short of Castiel's position. He has a wound that runs through his bottom lip across the edge of his jaw, a red angry thing that cracks and bleeds as he speaks. "Whatever happened to the Cap?"

"He went down on the landing," Castiel says, for what seems like the hundredth time today, and, without waiting for any further conversation of the how's and why's of his impromptu promotion, he updates Gabriel on the situation and the likely strength of the last

enemy position based on the last three that they took out.

Grateful, Gabriel pats a hand to Castiel's upper arm and then sidles away, hands in pockets, to instruct his men with a kind of lazy authority that Castiel almost envies – with a twang of anxiety, he muses that Gabriel has probably never had to talk down a subordinate for resenting his commands. He doesn't let himself dwell on it, however, and he gets to moving his own squad back down the road to Vierville while Fox Company continue west to do all the hard work.

The sun is climbing now, hot on the baked dirt and on the backs of their necks as they patrol back, and if there is a cool breeze up from the sea less than a mile away, they don't feel the benefit of it. They're sweaty and breathless for the most part, and Castiel still strangely conscious of the round buried in the front of his helmet – although Corporal Mills, when he'd seen him, had laughed out loud with the delighted exclamation, "You've got a pretty little souvenir there, lieutenant!"

When they get into Vierville, the rest of their disjointed almost-company is sitting around on the steps of a grand monument honouring the lives of the brave townspeople who were lost in the Great War, smoking up or napping in the warm lull of sunshine or otherwise stretching in the luxury of a moment without urgency. Upon seeing Castiel, some of them wave or call out greetings; he tips the front of his helmet politely in their direction as he slows to stand in front of the statue. For a second, he looks up at it, but the afternoon light glinting off the dull bronze is too harsh in his eyes for him to read the inscription, and he turns instead to survey the men sprawled on the steps.

"Doe," he calls as he finds the young Lance Corporal mid-argument with Laurie Gideon after having called bullshit on Gideon's story about meeting Rita Hayworth on a vacation in Orlando.

Doe finishes the debate by flicking the bum stump of his cigarette at

Gideon, and then swivels where he's sitting to answer Castiel. He shields his eyes with one hand to look up. "Sir?"

"Did you get all the POWs back to HQ alright?" Castiel asks.

"Yessir." Doe picks a wad of tobacco out of his mouth and flicks it absently into the distance. "Three of 'em, sir. All handed over to Major Everett for intel and called in to Lieutenant Shurley for the report, et cetera, et cetera…" Doe cocks his eyebrows impatiently as if to demand that no more be asked of him.

"Good. Thank you." Castiel looks over the rest of the men. "How are you all doing?"

Calls of '*good'* and '*alright, sir'* chorus back at him, mingled with the odd sarcastic comment; Ed Zeddmore grins from where he's spread out with his sprained ankle propped up on Corbett's knee, and he exaggerates some great wince as though he's in mortal agony.

"Didn't you hear, sir?" Andy Gallagher teases, and throws his arms back behind his head to stretch languidly over the steps. "We won!"

"Gallagher, your optimism is ever appreciated," Castiel says lightly, but he understands – they made it off the beach, this village is under their command, and there is a sort of lazy seaside easiness to being here in the wake of their first triumphant battles, sitting on the steps of the victors who came before them.

"What he means is shut the fuck up, Andy," Kris Chambers jeers around a mouthful of D-rations, and then ducks as Gallagher sits up to toss a crumpled ration wrapper at his head.

“Sir,” Sergeant Milligan gets to his feet, with one hand thrown up to catch Castiel’s attention. He pauses then, once Castiel has looked over, and waits as Castiel picks his way carefully around the cluster of slumped, lazy bodies at the base of the statue. Once Castiel is close enough for Adam to go on without the attention of the whole company, he goes on, “The S-1came by earlier to say that body searches on the beach have come up with a lot of good kit that I’d say the original owners probably aren’t gonna need anymore – said that if anyone needed anything replacing then they should head over and speak to him. He’s stationed in the first old stone house that side of the main road.”

“That’s good news. Thank you, sergeant.” Castiel turns back to face the rest of his men. “Does anyone have any kit in need of replacement?”

“Zeddmore lost his balls back on the beach, I think,” Private Miller pipes up.

“Shut the fuck up, Max!”

“Why – you gonna call your mom on me?”

“Hey, if you do,” Gallagher joins in, wearing a smug grin from ear to ear like he thinks he’s the funniest person alive, “let her know I won’t be around this weekend, but I’ll see her again real soon.”

Temporarily incapacitated by his injured ankle and unable to smack him, Zeddmore snatches up a combi-tool that’s sitting loose on top of someone’s open weapon-cleaning kit nearby, and hurls it at Andy as hard as he can.

“Come on, knock it off,” Corporal Lafitte grunts at them from around

his cigarette, as Reznik, the owner of the cleaning kit, lets out a wail of complaint.

Castiel looks between them all with a closed expression that he pitches somewhere between unimpressed and disapproving, despite a rush low in his chest at the knowledge that this time two days ago he hadn't known whether any of them would make it off the beach alive; he thinks he can deal with immature antics, then. "Right, well, if later it turns out that someone was in need of kit replacements, I'll be sure to point their complaints in your direction seeing as they couldn't get a word in edgeways," he says, eyebrows raised pointedly.

"Wait, sir!" Private Tran waves a hand frantically. "Sir, I lost my haversack on the beach."

Castiel nods. "Report it to Lieutenant Shurley. I'll get you a new one. Anyone else?"

Spruce speaks up about a broken musette bag, and a few of them grip about whether any more ration packs have come through, but otherwise the rest are in good order; someone calls in a pseudo-effeminate voice, "*My hero*!" as Castiel heads away from them in the direction of the house where Milligan had said the S-1 was based, and the ensuing laughter is good-humoured. For having invaded enemy territory and being stood now on foreign soil, vastly outnumbered by its German occupants, the men are relaxed and content. Castiel can't deny them that.

He finds Major Singer deep in conversation with some of the commanding officers of the other companies about the reallocation of so much lost equipment, while administrative staff from HQ company sort through damp, dirty haversacks piled to about waist-height and call out ownership details from any tags they can find. Castiel waits in the doorway for some lapse in the conversation when he can make his presence known, but before such an opportunity arises, Major Singer catches sight of him and makes an irritated noise in the back of his

throat.

“Let me guess,” he says with a roll of his eyes, “you need kit replacements too.”

The other officers – actual, qualified commanding officers, with at least the rank of Captain below their belt – notice him, then, and their eyes sweep over Castiel to take him in, not with intentional criticism, but Castiel feels younger and more inexperienced than ever. He recognises a tall, rakish blonde man, one Captain Azazel, of Easy Company, as having once attended Ant Milton’s pre-departure briefings on coordinating heavy artillery with the rifle companies; there’s a slim dark-haired Major who Castiel has never officially met, but whose face and position as head of Able Company he can pair with the name Michael Isaacs, and then one other Captain, for Dog, who he doesn’t know. Under their gazes, Castiel has an acute sense of insignificance, but he looks away from them and tilts his chin up to meet Major Singer’s eyes.

“Is there a problem, sir?” he asks.

“Yeah – seems like half the goddamned invasive force dropped their equipment on the beach or in the water, and now they’ve come stumbling back to look for it all.” Singer shakes his head. “We’ll get it sorted out. What do you need?”

“One standard-issue infantry haversack, and then I lost just about every on the landing,” Castiel starts.

“So that’s officer-issue haversack, musette bag, and all the stuffings,” Singer says, more over his shoulder to the administrators than to Castiel. “Anything else?”

“No, sir. Thank you, sir.” Castiel nods respectfully, and is about to head back out when Major Singer throws out a hand to stop him.

“One moment, Lieutenant.” Singer glances towards him and then looks back towards the other officers amassed in front of him. “All you COs need to go over at some point and speak to Major Campbell about your next movements. There should be a briefing tonight, ready to move in the morning.”

Castiel blinks. He had been anticipating several more days in Vierville, to finish clearing all the Omaha draws before they began to progress inland; this is sudden, unexpected, and sends a fresh rush of dread over him at his lack of preparation to command an entire company. “All due respect, sir, but moving out when there’s still at least of my company unaccounted for seems—”

Major Singer cuts right over him, his words sharp and exasperated. “Lieutenant, there is a very real possibility that every single one of them could be dead, in which case, we’re gonna be waiting one hell of a long time for them to be accounted for. Now, I’m sure that’s not the case, of course. We have some two thousand men the other side of Pointe du Hoc, but if we sit around waiting for them to clear it, the Krauts’ll come back to reclaim what territory we’ve already taken. We have to keep moving.”

Castiel presses his lips tightly together with the sense of having been smacked across the nose like a badly behaved pet, or a small child in need of chastisement – and in front of the other company commanding officers, as well, whom he’d been hoping to impress with wisdom beyond his years and sound tactical strategies in battle. “Yes, sir.”

“Right. If there ain’t anything else you need, then that’ll be all, Lieutenant – I still have things to discuss with the other COs,” Singer says, and turns away in a clear dismissal, not born of rudeness, but of simple preoccupation. This doesn’t make it feel any less like a rebuttal.

Castiel thanks him again, quietly, since the S-1 is already focused on the other officers, and then heads back out into the thick sunshine in search of his medic, knowing that a full battle report is preying on the horizon, and that in order for it to be written, he needs to know the details of the injuries sustained by his men.

By instinct, he starts back towards where the rest of his small, disjointed company are lounging to eat and smoke, before he remembers that he has already seen that Dean isn't there.

He pauses in the middle of the road, one foot in the gutter that runs like a long, open-topped prism down the middle of the road towards a stony drainage system that junctures off sharply at street corners; pigeons wing tiredly overhead, cutting short shadows against the sun as they pass over and settle on windowsills. He looks up and down the street both ways, towards the victory statue and then away deeper into the town, and it is some twenty yards further down the road, past the civilian buildings being used for HQ administration, that sees Private Bradbury idling wandering.

Even from here, he can detect the reddish stains of dark blood on Bradbury's hands, and he remembers that Charlie was the aid to the first casualty evacuations of the morning's assault. Castiel turns that way, and calls out, "Bradbury!"

Charlie looks up in surprise, and lifts a hand as though to wave, but instead settles that hand uncertainly on top of his helmet. He dithers for a second, as though unsure as to whether he should move to meet Castiel, or wait to see whether Castiel will come closer. At last he ventures a little closer; Castiel takes pity on him, and walks to meet him halfway.

"Sir?" Bradbury asks. "Everything okay?"

“Don’t worry, everything’s fine – have you seen Sergeant Winchester?” Castiel says.

“Not since the first cas-evac, sir, but if he isn’t with everybody else I’d expect he’s still in the medical tent,” Bradbury suggests. “Otherwise, no idea. Sorry.”

Castiel thanks him anyway, and directs him with a gesture, flat of his hand pointing down the street, towards the statue where the rest of the men are grouped for lunch and general re-organisation. Bradbury slips his helmet forwards off his head and scratches one hand through his scruffy red hair, caked as it is in mud and sweat, as he makes some awkward attempt to excuse himself, so Castiel officially dismisses him – to give them both some peace of mind and clarity. He continues then in what seems like blind fruitless search for Dean, but as Castiel rounds the corner towards the medical centre, he catches sight of Dean there. He is standing at the side of the road, bent over as he tries to wipe his hands clean with a rag of dubious hygiene. He is dirt-smeared, with a dark splash of dried blood over one eyebrow, and he looks up as Castiel approaches.

“Sir.” Dean raises one hand in a lazy greeting. “How d’you do?”

“I’m alright.” Castiel comes to stand before him, hands loose at his sides. “What’s the report on the casualties?”

Dean exhales slowly, tilts his head back. “We’ve got one death – Private Scott, near-direct mortar hit, but he was one of the add-ons from A Coy – and we’ve got Blake in with a femoral artery puncture and a round lodged in his kneecap, which they’re working on getting out now, and then there’s Private Rourke, took a hunk of shrapnel to the face, but it’s nothing serious…” Dean trails off with a shrug.

Castiel makes a mental note of it; it'll have to go in the assault report later. "Do you have estimated recovery times?"

"Rourke should be ready to go in a day or two, as long as he takes it easy for a while. Blake…" Dean grimaces. "It could be months."

"Noted. I'll let the S-1 know. And you?"

Dean looks at him. "What about me?"

Castiel glances him over – skips past the gleam of sweat on his skin where his shirt opens and looks instead to the lean of his hips, the careful bend of one knee. "You're favouring your right leg."

"Oh." Dean lets out a short laugh and tips his head down. "Yeah."

"What did you do?"

"I, uh," Dean starts, his eye contact only fleeting, "I pulled a muscle, sir."

Castiel stares at him. "You pulled a muscle," he repeats.

Dean tucks his bottom lip sheepishly between his teeth in an attempt to bite back his embarrassed grin. "Yes, sir."

"It would seem you foolishly neglected those all-important muscle warm-ups on the start line of an assault," Castiel dead-pans, and he

lifts his eyebrows.

Dean rolls his eyes. “Yeah, okay, it’s ridiculous, I know—”

“I didn’t say it was ridiculous—”

“But it *is* ridiculous—”

“Yes, it is.” Castiel can feel the tug of a smile on his mouth. He looks at Dean, his head slightly tipped to one side, and just takes him in – his skewed, sweaty hair, his nose crinkled where he winks against the sunlight now that the day is easing into bright ripples of summer heat. There is a waxy streak of camouflage cream above his upper lip, and in that yellow light, thick as home-made lemonade, he looks warm. Castiel narrows his eyes against the contented pull of his mouth to grin back at Dean, and looks away towards the statue at the other end of the road. “You should get some food down. I don’t know our next orders yet, but we could be moving out again soon.”

Dean nods. “Yessir.”

He stoops to collect his helmet where it was lolling against his boot as he cleaned his hands, and Castiel spies the white flash of photo-paper folded into the headband before Dean fits it to his head. Castiel wonders if Dean would be in love with a dark-haired girl in ribbons, or if his sweetheart is some sweet golden summer thing. He wonders if Dean would’ve had the foresight to ask her to marry him before he went away.

“Sir?” Dean lifts his eyebrows. “Was there anything else, or…?”

Castiel blinks. “No.” He clears his throat. “That’ll be all, sergeant.”

“Okay.” Dean looks at him curiously, but then sidesteps Castiel neatly and heads off towards the main square with only a slight limp. Castiel waits until Dean’s footsteps have faded entirely before he turns away from the medical tent and heads off to find his executive officer. He has a battle report to write up.

Chapter 4: Grandcamp-Les-Bains

8th June, 1944

Dear Sam,

Well, I made it to France! I say that like I'm surprised, but the crossing was difficult. We lost a lot of guys. I got a lot of guys back who we could have lost, I'll say, but we still lost a lot. Like I said, it was tough. I can't say too much about what we're doing at the moment, you know, in case the letters get intercepted or anything, but do you remember the way we used to play when we hung out with the McHewens, back when you were in the third grade? With the treehouses and the girls' fort versus the boys' playhouse? It's like that right now. Except a little bigger, I guess. I don't think anybody ever went into a playhouse flamethrower-first.

There was a couple of days where we all got split up - we lost half the platoon when the landing went a little haywire, skewing men everywhere - but we're getting everyone back together and sorted now. There was this cliff we had to clear - a real big deal, since a load of infantry Rangers had already been at it for days - and we were going cross-country with tanks and naval support and all kinds, Sam, you'd have thought it crazy. Absolute chaos, but all of us working together got it done by noon and we were able to settle down to lunch on these clifftop - Pointe du Hoc, since I figure even if the Krauts steal my letter (in which case, how fucking dare you and I sincerely hope you put this back in its envelope and send it straight on its way before I catch wind that my little brother never got his post) they won't be too much informed in hearing about a battle that's been over and past for days - anyway, so there was hundreds and hundreds of us, all sweaty and exhausted, up on that clifftop, and we got a good hour or so while the officers were sorting out admin and next movements, when we all got to just sit around on this grassy slope eating our lunch and looking out at the ocean, and let me tell you, Sammy, that was one fucking beautiful day.

And hey, don't say that about Novak. I mean, yeah, he's kind of an asshole, but he's not that bad. As far as stressed-out grumpy officers go, he's a good one. He's growing on me. We're not friends, but - I don't know.

Plus, you never know that he's not gonna read all my letters and then send me out on a suicide run or some shit for it. Can't be too careful. More importantly, I spoke to dad. He sounds sorry, like, really sorry. You know he didn't mean to lose it so badly, he was just a little messed up and he'd been out all night – and don't say that he doesn't care about you going to college, you know that's not true. He's real proud of you, Sammy, and one day he'll figure out how to show it proper. Trust me.

Anyway, that's all from me for now. Write back whenever and I'll send my next letter as soon as I can. Take care of yourself, and good luck with your paper! (And DON'T wear that brown shirt to the movies. I know you want to but don't. Jess will run a goddamn mile. Wear something nice. And tell her nice things when you see her. Buy her some popcorn, you'll be fine.) See you around – bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

9th June 1944

"Alright, alright, I've got one – so how do you know if your sister's on her period?"

Corporal Mills makes a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. "Jesus Christ, Gallagher—"

Private Gallagher lets out a shrieking laugh. "'Cause then your dad's dick tastes of bl—"

The end of the joke is drowned out by revolted complaint, and a well-thrown stone bounces off the back of Andy's head with enough force that he stumbles. Castiel lifts his eyes skywards in hope of some heavenly sign that this too will pass.

They're on the road west towards Isigny-sur-Mer, with Vierville some six miles behind them, the sun at their backs, and their patrol formation loose and lazy as they march in three ranks down the long coastal highway that veers away from the landing beaches towards Isigny-sur-Mer, an essential point in coastline enemy communication, and a necessary capture in order to join with VII Corps. There are enemy batteries still active along the road which they've been tasked with clearing out, and, having already captured the occupied towns of Gruchy and Saint-Pierre-du-Mont, as well as assisting the 175th and 224th in clearing Pointe du Hoc, the men feel pretty good.

The day is clear and optimistic, with their next target - that of Grandcamp-les-Bains, a heavily occupied coastal resort town whose main access route is a single bridge - only a few hours' march away, and with the afternoon coming up hot, sweat prickling under their helmets, Castiel has let the men loosen up a little to talk as they walk. First they griped; now they've fallen to telling jokes, the quality of which are rapidly deteriorating, and Castiel is beginning to regret his initial decision.

"Man, that's fucking disgusting—"

"You are not allowed to tell anymore jokes. Ever," Staff Sergeant Milligan said emphatically, his nose screwing up at the end. "Actually, no – fuck it. You're going point man for that."

"Aw, come on!" Gallagher protests, and he spins as he walks to face backwards so as to face Milligan properly. "It wasn't that bad—"

“Face the front,” Castiel calls out from his position a few rows back, tucked in one-platoon’s order of march to hide his own elevated rank, while someone further behind snickers, *that’s what she said.*

“Too late, Andy,” Milligan says, his voice almost cheerfully singsong. “Switch out with Spruce.”

Obediently, Gallagher does, even if he does grumble all the way as he jogs up the front of the patrol, and Spruce breathes a relieved sigh as he drops back. No-one likes going point man; jokes about having the best view aside, few men are particularly enthused by the necessity to pay the most attention to the upcoming landscapes and obstacles, as well as the prospect of being the most likely to get shot. At the moment, luckily, it isn’t such a problem, as they’re marching in one long column, with the 5th Division Rangers ahead of them. Taking Grandcamp promises to be difficult, since their intel had informed that the highway approach leads across a flooded valley, and that the enemy has strong points to the west with extensive fields of fire from higher ground, and so having the battle-practiced Rangers up ahead makes for a comforting presence.

Castiel raises his voice with his own addition to cut through the chatter of the men still mocking Gallagher’s idiocy and poor taste. “What’s red and shaped like a shovel?” Just ahead of him, Private Tran tips his head back with a short laugh as he pre-emptively understands where the joke is going. Castiel ignores him, squints a little in the light, and delivers: “A red shovel.”

A chorus of groans filters up around him, so Castiel considers the joke well-executed.

“Sir, that was majestic,” Corporal Lafitte drawls, some few yards behind. “Gave me honest-to-god chills.”

“I do like to keep my wits sharp,” Castiel says. “It’s been said I have a natural gift for comedic timing.”

Someone snorts and hastily turns it into a cough.

“So there’s this guy who can't get it up,” Dean’s voice starts up, far enough ahead of Castiel that he can’t identify where exactly in the patrol he is, but he has a knack for story-telling, and as ever, as when he would regale the whole company with anecdotes from his little brother regardless of whether or not they were interested, his voice carries. “Right? And he’s got this date one night who doesn’t know about it—”

“Sounds like your autobiography, Zeddmore!”

“Shut the fuck up!”

Everyone in the near vicinity does shut up, though; they fall into an eager hush, knowing from experience that Dean’s jokes are usually almost side-splitting, and always unexpected. There’s something in his voice as well, his delivery, the dumb little voices he puts on for different characters, like he’s setting up some kind of pantomime for entertaining children, and so it’s impossible to keep from leaning in to listen.

“—bails on it! And so the girl calls him the next morning, mad as anything, starts asking why he didn’t show up,” Dean is saying, and there, up ahead, are his wildly gesticulating hands. “Now this is gonna be awkward, but he figures, just be as honest as possible—”

Something flashes bright in the distance.

Castiel's eyes snap across to catch it, but it's already gone. He stares after where he thought he saw it, waiting to see if it was something easily explained away – the shift of sun behind clouds, or light off the buckle of the haversack of the man in front. The road stretches out long and straight for a couple hundred yards or so before it begins to be broken up by small houses, little stone structures with shutters painted bright colours that shine out of the otherwise monochrome blurs of buildings, marking out Les Rivieres, the last village before the town boundaries of Grandcamp-les-Bains and this seems to be where the flash had come from.

It is entirely possible, Castiel tells himself, that it could be nothing at all, or something entirely mundane, like a woman wearing a new metal watch out in the sunshine, oblivious of the approaching American battalions. He stares until his eyes water, and nothing seems to change.

Dean's voice continues, fainter now as Castiel focuses on the entirety their surroundings with an intensity that blurs all his vision together. "And she says, 'oh, that's terrible, I'm so sorry! But if you were embarrassed about it, you could have just turned up to the date and explained it to m—"

The light flashes again, for a split-second longer this time, and Castiel hones in on the source. It's undeniable this time; straight down the road, through the middle of the village, there is something dark and metallic that winks in the sunlight.

"—and *he* says, 'oh, don't worry, darling, I wasn't embarrassed! It was just that I—"

"Winchester, shut up," Castiel says, raising his voice to cut straight through Dean's. "I want everyone tactical. Now."

Silence falls heavy like a bucket of rainwater being abruptly up-ended, save for the clanking of equipment as the men check their safety catches, hesitantly shift their ammunition, and prepare for imminent enemy contact. The hush spreads quickly through the entire column like a wave, until it seems that not a single person from the five small, disjointed companies pushing down the highway towards Grandcamp even dares to breathe.

Castiel squints through the sunlight down the road for any further developments, but there is no movement whatsoever from the far end of the village. He recalls from his briefing that there is a single bridge over the Elle River into this side of Grandcamp, and it lies just beyond the last houses of Les Rivieres. He highly doubts that the German occupants of Grandcamp are simply going to let them cross it.

“Laufeyson?” he calls haltingly, and his eyes flicker across the backs of the heads of his men, in search of the point where his company starts and the previous company ends, and, more specifically, in search of the Fox Company CO. “We’ve got at least one position at the end of the village.”

“Seen,” Gabriel Laufeyson calls back, voice soft as though trying not to spook a wild animal as the companies march onwards, the footsteps of a hundred-odd men a drum-beat, in time as they crunch over the gravel and asphalt. “Light artillery, I think.”

Castiel swallows hard. He tries to clear his head, give himself space to think. Company commanding officer, he reminds himself. Something is going to happen, soon, and he’s going to have to be ready for it. “So what are they waiting for?” he mutters.

“God knows.”

They slow down and split off, letting the 5th Rangers spread into

tactical offensive positions along with Captain Laufeyson's Fox Company, and otherwise the 116th drop back as a reserve. They head off the road into low cover to wait and watch to see if they'll be needed, either as fire support or as reinforcements. Private Kris Chambers heads off with Laufeyson's men as a runner, ready to relay any messages back to Castiel if radio communication fails.

If all goes according to plan, after this bridge crossing the 2nd Battalion will be heading southwest through the countryside to outflank Grandcamp via capturing its neighbours, Maisy and Le Calvaire - but if they can't get this bridge, it's going to be one hell of a long walk around. For now, though, they can only wait and see.

They huddle low along the side of the highway, tucked into a grassy ditch where the ground slopes away from the tarmac's edge, and they clutch their weapons close to steady their nerves as they watch the first two platoons of the point Rangers company spread into staggered file and amble, seemingly without care, down the road through Les Rivieres.

In one of the village houses, a window shutter bangs, twice. Someone further along the line nervously clears their throat. Castiel has the sense that, just for one moment, the whole world is holding its breath.

Then Dean begins to whistle.

It's some shrill, obnoxiously cheerful tune that Castiel vaguely recognises from radio advertisements back home - vaguely, as even to say that Dean is tuneless would be an excessive kindness - and he drums his fingertips on the metal buckle of his first aid bag so that it clanks and jingles along with him.

"Winchester, shut up," Castiel hisses, and he throws a glare in his direction.

Dean catches Castiel's eye and cocks one eyebrow up as though mocking him for a suggestion that is, really, pure common sense, and could well keep them all from being killed. Thankfully, though, Dean does stop whistling.

Castiel turns back to face the road but the Rangers are now out of sight behind the line of houses, and all is silent again. Then there is the crack of a rifle - and again, and then again, layer upon layer until the air is thick with it, only broken by the loose bone-chatter of machine-gunners. There's a dull, heavy noise, followed by a whistle as high as a songbird, a crash, and then there's smoke and dirt and frantic yells rising over the grey-shingle rooftops.

Dean starts to whistle again. This time, it's *She'll Be Coming 'Round The Mountain When She Comes.*

"Winchester!" Castiel snaps.

The mortars come in volleys and send tremors all through the earth that reach them even at the roadside beyond the village boundaries, and dimly the screams of the assaulting men form words - *drop back; find a way around; fucking hell radio in for light artillery effective immediately centre-left of axis* - and Castiel realises that he's still holding his breath. He exhales slowly.

As the yells for direction turn to *oh shit someone get me a medic*, Dean dusts off his hands on his combat pants and gets to his feet. "That's my cue," he says under his breath, and with that, and one hand curled around the strap of his bag to keep it steady, he sets off running. Much to Castiel's annoyance, he whistles as he goes.

For the best part of an hour, Baker Company are not called upon to do

anything other than wait and occasionally to help those actually involved in the fire-fight to bomb up new ammunition clips. Castiel has a cramp in one leg, and he sees of the men nearby shifting their weight and shaking pins and needles out of their limbs. Then, at around oh-nine-hundred hours, Private Chambers comes breathlessly sprinting back from Captain Laufeyson's side to say that they need heavier artillery to break through the German position, and that the 116th are to set up fire support either side of the town while General Gerhadt calls in the 743rd Tank Battalion.

Castiel nods. He raises his voice over the noise. "Where should I meet him?"

Chambers points. Castiel takes a moment to notify Second Lieutenant Virgil, his temporary second-in-command, and then takes off at a jog, crouching low so as not to be seen in all the smoke and thunder.

The plan is a simple one, Castiel discovers: cover our own asses while the tankies do the hard shit. Gabriel's words.

Baker Company take the far left, maneuvering behind the neat stone houses to a position where they can lay down enough suppressive fire to at least keep them all alive until something a little heavier gets here to clear the bridge. They move fast and dig in hard - platoons one and two along the river's dry grass verge, three and four fifty yards back to keep light artillery on the enemy gunner position, as well as to keep an eye out for German reinforcements coming in from Grandcamp and the surrounding area.

Two of the German gunners and half a light mortar squad switch fire to target Baker, so it's by no means an easy position. They kneel or crouch or lie flat on their bellies in dust and prickly grass, rifles tucked up against their bodies like clinging to a fraying lifeline while bullets rattle past them. Castiel presses low into the dirt and he yells himself hoarse over the crash of incoming shells that land near or amongst them and he fires steady with the tip of his tongue pushed

into his cheek for concentration.

By oh-ten-hundred, the bridge is cleared, with the help of the 743rd Tank Battalion; by oh-ten-fifteen, Baker Company is heading down the country road that bypasses Grandcamp in the direction of Maisy - a blissful two-hour relief from being constantly attacked on all sides, during which there is sunlight and birdsong and, to Castiel's distaste, more idiotic, filthy-mouthed jokes. This is a category in which Dean Winchester, of course, seems to specialise.

They make it to Maisy before lunchtime, much to Private Bradbury's disappointment, who has been daydreaming out loud about his D-ration chocolate bar all day. There's no time to eat before the next offensive - comms are coming through on the radio about enemy strongpoints spread throughout the town, securing a defensive perimeter of the inner city, where the German officers and HQs would be located, or so Gabriel Laufeyson assumed when he called Castiel over the radio. There's one especially secure and essential strongpoint just to the west of Maisy, and it's here that Castiel is directed.

They follow the curving bypass road until it turns south towards Le Lieu Jean Margot, at which point they cut cross-country through dusty yellow harvest fields, waist-height oceans of baby corn and rapeseed. A couple of the men have hayfever and sneeze themselves dizzy as they patrol, but it's less than a mile and a half navigating crops and crooked old farmhouses before they're nearly upon Maisy, so it should be manageable. Dean busies himself jogging up and down the length of the patrol formation to check on everyone, giving out scraps of rag to anyone suffering particularly badly, and his voice is constant background murmur of reassurance and *don't worry, we'll be out of these fields soon - back into urban areas to be shot at!* They laugh with him, at least, even with red noses and prickly tears streaming down their face.

They're still at least a mile out of Maisy, however, coming up soon to one of the smaller outlying towns, when the hungry roar of machine guns start up ahead of them and cut the corn to pieces.

“Take cover!” Lieutenant Virgil screams out from the other end of the company, and there’s a correlation of approximately one second between the sound of his voice fading, and the hollow clunk that is more felt through the soles of Castiel’s feet than technically heard – then a whistle, faint and shrill, and the word *incoming* has barely left Castiel’s mouth as a strangled yell before the mortar hits.

It doesn’t strike near Castiel – he’s near the front, and it lands further back – but its impact jars his feet out from underneath him and he lands shoulder-first in the dry soil. Pain jolts down through his arm and temporarily incapacitates everything from elbow to fingertips, but the thud and scream has already started up once again, though, and again after that, and there’s no time to spare in wincing over old injuries. He rolls over onto the other shoulder and uses that arm to scramble back to his feet and runs, bent low, to drive his men forwards into the engagement.

There’s a long hedgerow some two hundred yards ahead of them, from where muzzle-flash flickers brightly like the lighting rig at the bow of a battleship. Bullets tear neat holes in sturdy corn-husks standing up to attention while Castiel’s infantry soldiers roll and crawl and scurry along behind its cover for an opportunity to return fire without being shredded. All the while mortars are being kicked off lazily, each dull *thunk* the echo of one man spitting damp wads of tobacco into the trash.

He grabs a handful of some private’s combat jacket – doesn’t see who, doesn’t matter who – and hauls them close to him for long enough to yell over the chaos, “Get to Montgomery, tell him to get mortars out and four-platoon down for suppressive fire”, before he pushes him away in the right direction. Then Castiel is moving again, eyes narrowed against the loose dirt that cascades down onto his helmet and shoulders like hail where mortar impact has dislodged it from the ground. The ground is quaking beneath his boots and he runs with weak, wobbly knees.

He stumbles on a clump of uprooted corn but keeps himself upright, just about, and crashes hard into Benny Lafitte. “Corporal, take your fire-teams out left for a better view,” he yells, voice scratched raw. “See if there’s a way to flank them.” He uses a hand on Lafitte’s shoulder to steady himself as he twists back to find the other NCOs. “Milligan? *Milligan*! Arrowhead- lead one-platoon forwards.” He turns away as he sees Sergeant Milligan getting to his feet to collect his men for movement, and he lets go of Lafitte’s shoulder so that he can go and actually do his job. Castiel drops to one knee, then, as the nearby hiss of bullets into dirt presses him low and submissive, but he looks back at the untidy sprawl of his men as they try to work their way forwards into any semblance of order and control, and he yells, “And someone get me Sergeant Barnes!”

They progress in short bounds towards the far side of the field where the attack seems to be mostly coming from, as they quickly discover that on all other sides unaffected by the enemy laying down a position in the shrubbery, the hedgerows are thick and impregnable; a flanking is impossible, and so the only option is to drive straight forwards to where the road is nearest and the hedges are thinnest. They run hard, find good cover, and lay down fatal force sufficient to get the Germans’ heads down long enough for Milligan’s first fire-teams to push right across and dig out the gunners.

Castiel can feel bruises blossoming beneath his jacket where the butt of his rifle kicks back hard into his shoulder, but at least it’s his good shoulder; the other thumps with a perpetual ache that crests and falls with his every movement. His voice cracks as he shouts over the noise, and he can barely hear himself, doesn’t know if his messages are even getting through to anyone - but there is Corporal Lafitte streaking fast through the corn on the left axis, riflemen clattering behind him, and there is Sergeant Milligan disappearing and reappearing amongst the crops as he presses forwards steadily, and there, at last, is the dull clank behind him of their own mortars being set up. There’s a long whistle like a songbird, and then a thick plume of smoke and dirt rises with a bang from the base of the hedgerow, tearing a hole where the hedges are already thin, and through that ragged gap, a scrambling team of German gunners can be seen.

They outnumber the Germans at least five to one, their position being only a defensive one on the outskirts of Isigny, but from that point, it's a tactical push all the way to Maisy. There are several more German positions scattered on the outskirts - tucked away in the high windows of a sprawling estate home, which Corporal Montgomery roots out easily enough with a few well-placed mortars; gunners hidden in hedgerows, which slow them down greatly as they're difficult to spot, and more difficult yet to destroy - and while they take several minor casualties, for the most part the German defence of Maisy seems scattered and disorganised.

They vault low, crumbling stone walls to get back onto the main road and move fast, their progress balanced somewhere between marching and running as they storm in through the country houses and pretty gardens. Castiel sends one platoon further down the road they've been following so far; sends two- and four-platoon down the narrower Rue de Centre, past terraced homes in the direction of the church, a logical strongpoint.

However, as they head deeper into the town, the image of it changes; the flower-fronted cottages turned into loose heaps of stone, the charming rural shop facade into a blackened hole. There is one house, half-collapsed like a rotten lung, where a fire is still burning. The walls of the house next door buckle and slope towards it, as though that destruction has left some kind of black hole itching to suck everything else in. Castiel understands now why Maisy's defensive perimeter was so incomplete; the British Navy had got here before anyone else, and near enough torn the whole place to shreds. There is little left in the way of German forces, or, for that matter, of everyday village life, and so Castiel is left with the distinct impression that when Maisy came under fire, the majority of the Germans retreated back into stronger positions Grandcamp and left those still trapped beyond Maisy floundering and without orders. It's no reason to underestimate those left behind, though.

Castiel takes three-platoon down a narrow side-alley to meet beyond the church, and when they all reunite on the other side of the town with little damage to men or morale, they push on for Grandcamp.

In the distance, there are the heavy sounds of mortar fire and what could even be naval assault weapons, and while smoke churns up thickly from far away, for now, the Grandcamp through which Baker Company patrols is silent and still. It's unsettling; they tread what is is not only the main road through town, but also one of the biggest access routes to Grandcamp's *mairie*, where the mayor would live and where all city council meetings would be held - a place that, although technically not in the centre of the town, would be the heart of it. That it should be so entirely deserted makes no sense, and raises warning bells all through Castiel's body.

Castiel lifts a hand and gestures sharply to his NCOs that they should split off into platoons and spread out - two-platoon heading north towards the coast, where large hotels and seaside resorts could be occupied, three-platoon remaining on the main road through the city, one-platoon heading out through quiet suburban areas to outflank the *mairie,* and four-platoon's firepower divided between the others.

One-platoon skirts a large roundabout and heads southeast through housing estates with fine, green gardens. They move carefully, pressing in close to walls and peering around every corner to judge hazards before they continue. There are school grounds and dusty construction sites and wide, fresh fields with soccer posts of peeling metal, and they tramp heavy footprints through the grass as they push on.

The distant sounds of warfare grow ever louder and more intense - screaming now, somewhere north, the hollow drum of heavy artillery, and the plumes of smoke thicken to impenetrable blackness as though taking their strength from the increasing chaos which gave birth to them - and yet Castiel's platoon remains unconfronted. Radio comms are fragmented and fuzzy, so that he gets through only briefly to Second Lieutenant Virgil, who has gone north with two-platoon, and then all awareness of the rest of the company's movement disappears into the smoke. Everyone else, it seems, is caught up in fear and violence, and here is Castiel, walking through daisies with sweat chafing his helmet against his forehead, and no sign of Germans

anywhere. He feels he could throw up.

They scale a chain-link fence, four by four, kneeling in the dirt to wait as the next group swing over, and then they find themselves once more on battered hedgerow-lined roads towards the open square where the *mairie* is situated. Up ahead, the road splits five ways.

Castiel beckons for Sergeant Milligan to join him, and together they jog up to the edge of the junction. He presses in close to the solid wall of hedges and counts to three - to calm his anxiously pitching stomach, more than out of any necessity to let three seconds escape - and then peers around the corner. The junction is clear, and the street across the way, the one they want to follow back into the inner city, has no marked threats, with the exception of one heavy groceries truck parked by the far sidewalk, which has dangerous potential for hiding any enemy position. Nothing else in the vicinity seems particularly threatening, however, and as it stands, nothing has changed over the passage of several minutes, including the truck. Castiel is left to conclude that this route is safe to traverse, albeit carefully.

He twists back to face Milligan behind him. “Sergeant, send two-section across the road, I want that truck checked out before we go any further. Once you’ve got the all-clear from Lafitte, I want Barnes and three-section following. the proven route. You’ll take one-section down the northeast road back towards Vierville, clear out that side of the mayor’s office.” He directs him with his hands first, and then pulls the map of the area from the inside pocket of his jacket to indicate the remainder of the area they’re clearing. “And watch out - this whole area is an ambush waiting to happen. Any questions?”

“No, sir.” With breathless grunts and the clank of heavy, metallic equipment in their haversacks, First Sergeant Milligan hauls himself onto his feet and heads back to briefly update the rest of the NCOs on the given orders before they hurry off to see them fulfilled.

Castiel holds still, his spine a straight line pressed to the hedge until he's in danger of sinking back into it, until Lafitte's ten-man section runs past, wide-mouthed with exertion, helmets too-big and shimmying on their head with chinstraps loosened to evade sweat-burn and awkward tan-lines. He pushes away from the hedge again to peek around, watches them disappear one by one behind the truck, and he thinks he'll never get used to this - the way his whole chest seems to constrict like there's a weight atop his ribcage, the knowledge that he is responsible for the lives of these men and that he's let them slip from his sight with no way to confirm that they'll ever come back. He shuts down that thought before it can flower into full panic. He sets his jaw tight and waits.

Then, after a beat in which, save for the scuff of boots through dirt, there is no sound at all, Corporal Laffite's voice comes through: "Clear!"

Castiel twists back to yell, "Milligan!" and waves the next section through to take the northern road. As one-section storm past, Sergeant Barnes goes running by with three-section to cross the junction in one straight file, and Castiel lets five of them past him before he pushes himself off the hedge wall with enough force to give him the momentum to take off running, and slips into their midst to follow them towards the *mairie*.

They slow down once they're back in more cover, hidden between tall houses rather than completely exposed from five different directions - first jogging, then walking quickly, then a slow amble as they turn their weapons to check every doorway and every yard set back from the sidewalk. It's another couple hundred yards to the *mairie,* but so far the road looks quiet and unthreatening. Castiel's pulse is near deafening as it echoes in his skull; those thin threads of anxiety that he'd felt earlier now twist their twine around his heart to the point of suffocating. There is the *mairie*.

Castiel exhales through his teeth. "Go carefully," he calls to Sergeant Barnes. "I get the feeling that—"

A crack rings out sharply. It echoes against the stone columns and hard, painted shutters of the town hall, on and on, so that one split second lingers much longer, and before the shot has even faded into background noise, Lance Corporal Dobbs hits the cobbles face-first.

Blood drips down Castiel's face and trickles into his mouth.

It's odd - maybe it's just shock - but Castiel's primary reaction is not to get down out of the way, as it should be. He just blinks, and his eyelashes matt and clump and stick together. As a result, it's nothing more than pure blind luck that the next person picked off by the sniper is not him, but rather the man five yards ahead of him. Private Corbett.

There is another snap like a prematurely burst firecracker, and there is a spray of blood, a fine mist that coats everything thinly, and at last Castiel breaks into action.

"Medic!" he yells, and sprints for the nearest doorway, where he throws himself against the wooden door and presses as far in as he can to avoid being seen. He takes a second to breathe, his chest heaving with shallow, panicked gulps of air as the reality of the situation floods in towards. Then he presses the back of his head hard against the walls, tilts his chin up to better clear his airway, and screams again. "*Medic*!"

The crack of the sniper rifle's shot sounds again. Castiel doesn't know where it hits, but it kicks off a cloud of dark orange brick dust nearby, and this time, it seems it is not a clean shot; there is a high-pitched yelp before the thud to the ground, the clatter of the fallen man's weapon against the asphalt, and then there is the undeniable slow-drag shuffle of someone struggling. When they breathe, the sound is a blocked bathtub, draining jerkily. Castiel doesn't know who is getting hit. There is another shot, and someone starts to scream.

He opens his mouth to yell for a medic one last time - he doesn't know what else to do - he'd been so careful, considered every potential danger, been so thorough clearing each hazard, and he'd simply never thought that there would be snipers. The scream hasn't left his mouth before there comes a body crashing into his doorway, crushed flat against his chest in an attempt to get as close as possible into where Castiel is hiding, so that they might both avoid being seen, and then Dean lifts his head to speak and they're breathing the same air. Their noses collide and Dean's hands are pressed up against Castiel's collarbones, but Castiel is too busy breathlessly struggling against panic to even think about it.

"Where're you hit?"

"Not me - Dobbs - and - Corbett, and two others," Castiel manages.

Dean shoves away from him and is gone. Castiel's knees shake to buckling point, but he presses his back in tight against the wall to hold himself up, and then, after a moment to breathe (in - out - in - out - in), he pushes away from his corner and takes off for the next area of cover.

The screaming increases in both pitch and volume, forming barely coherent words that call out to a mother or wife or God above. Castiel's men bleed out over the asphalt in spurts and slow-creeping puddles, through which Castiel splashes and stumbles to get to a heavy wooden gate. Already huddled there, out of sight, are three young privates, white-faced and whispering frantically to one another. Castiel near enough crashes into them, and spares them only a passing glance to check that they're all uninjured before turning away to scan the length of the road in search of his NCOs.

"Sergeant Barnes!" he yells. No response. The platoon is scattered; there are men in doorways, in bushes, in neatly-pruned front gardens,

hiding behind stray vehicles and tucked under staircases. “Lafitte!” Only a faint shout comes back that Castiel recognises are being Corporal Mills, but it issues from way down the road in a small garden where there are crooked-branched fig trees that clump close together and provide good cover. Corporal Lafitte and Sergeant Barnes don’t answer at all. “Corporal Doe?” he tries, but again, to no response, even as he yells himself hoarse.

He changes tactics.

“Spruce,” he says to one of the privates beside him. “Get out there and find me Lance Corporal Doe. Head left, the way we came. Gideon, you too - head up past the truck. Send him here when found. And if either of you come across any of the NCOs, that would be extremely helpful. Reznik and -who’s that past you? - Tran. I want suppressive fire down as thery move out.”

Private Reznik blinks with surprise. “What? Sir - where?” he blurts out, wide-eyed.

Castiel doesn’t look at him; instead he checks his own weapon and snaps the safety off. “The bullets are coming from behind us - best guess is the mayor’s office,” he says. “Go high.” He shuffles out from his hiding place against the gate and twists to aim up towards the *mairie*. He glances over at Spruce and Gideon. “Now!”

The two runners take off, and Castiel his rifle close into his shoulder. He shoots one careful crack after another, slow and calculated, as Reznik’s grease-gun spews out a metallic roar of bullets to chatter off the *mairie’*s neatly-painted yellow walls.

In all honesty, they have little to no idea of where the sniper is, but the bullets are coming down from the eastern edge of the road, and these high, strong windows seem like a logical choice. Unfortunately,

however, the sniper is now being exceedingly quiet and well-behaved; having taken out several men and incited general chaos, there is no sign of him, and so he could be anywhere. He could be moving position; he could be gone entirely, although that hypothesis seems very unlikely indeed. One thing is certain, though: as long as there is suppressive fire being laid down on him, the sniper would not likely risk any further offensive action, and therefore as long as rounds are being put down in his general direction, it is moderately safe for Castiel to reorganise the platoon for a more cohesive assault.

Of the two men sent off a retrieval mission, Private Spruce is back first, with both Sergeant Barnes and Lance Corporal Doe in tow - the former, bleeding profusely from one arm, which hangs uselessly and at an unnatural angle across his body. Corporal Rudy Doe, on the other hand, seems to be fine, and that suits Castiel well; at five-foot-two, he may be one of the smallest men in the company, which, paired with a baby face and soft dark hair like a baby's, leads to him being widely underestimated, but he remains one of the best sharpshooters in the 29th Division.

Castiel orders Barnes away to pass over his command and then wait to be treated by Sergeant Winchester, and then sets up 2IC with Corporal Johnny Mills, to cover Lance Corporal Doe with more suppressive fire while Doe gets a shot in. There are more gunners from Reznik's team to be found in a nearby garage who hustle into position for fire support, and Doe tucks himself comfortably on his belly in the long grass of the garden opposite, and then all is silent.

Still, there is no sign of the sniper. Several minutes pass in an absolute hush before Castiel snaps a hand signal across to Corporal Mills - *switch fire right.* Let the enemy think that they've changed their approach, searching for him in new buildings with new possibilities. Then, after a few minutes more, Castiel draws in a long breath and taps the soldier beside him on the arm.

"Private Tran, prepare to move," he says quietly. "I'm going to need you to do a suicide sprint."

Some of the colour drains from Tran's face, but he nods without complaint. He draws in a deep breath. "Where to, sir?"

"Back of the truck. In your own time, private."

Castiel looks away, to Lance Corporal Doe, and gives a short nod. Meanwhile, Private Tran rearranges his haversack straps and shifts his grip on his rifle as he gets ready to go. Then, abruptly, so as to give the sniper as little warning as possible, and protected by the rattle of bullets deliberately turned aside, Tran leaps up and runs across the road. There is a thunder of rounds to cover him and the sound of his boots on tarmac is an earthquake and there's a snap like the spine of a small bird that tears - just about - into his shoulder, as he zigzags wildly, and then Corporal Doe's rifle muzzle flashes hotly, once.

Tran staggers in the middle of the road, in clear view still, but no shots come to wipe him out, and he stumbles past the side of truck, clutching its corrugated walls for support, until he gets to the back corner where someone greets him with a wad of gauze to press to his shoulder and a comforting arm slung around his waist to guide him away.

Castiel release a pent-up breath. "Cease fire," he yells, and as all the gunfire cuts out at once, he glances across to Doe, still half-hidden in the grass. Lance Corporal Doe snaps up the tripod at the front of his rifle and climbs steadily to his feet, and gives a confident nod. Castiel calls out, then, "Mills - send one pair up into the mayor's office to confirm and search. Regroup all at the end of the road."

As the rest of the men jog down into the road to organise themselves, Castiel takes a moment to stride over towards the truck to see those hidden behind it, who form the impromptu medical team. Kevin Tran, thankfully, is not badly hurt; the round clipped the top of his shoulder and left only minimal damage.

“How are you doing?” Castiel asks.

Tran looks up and grimaces as he holds a wedge of gauze to his own shoulder. “Well, for a second I thought I was done for, but, uh, I’m okay.”

Castiel feels he should apologise for having made Tran do a suicide sprint, but they both know that it was the only thing to be done and that someone had to do it and that it wasn’t personal that Castiel asked him, and Castiel can’t seem to be sceptical on his own orders. Instead he looks away to see what’s happening with the rest of the casualties. He is greeted by the sounds of sobbing from one of the men on the floor being worked on.

Instantly Castiel’s eyes pick out the long, still bodies stretched out side by side along the far wall, and his throat tightens painfully. He can’t pick out facial features from this angle, even if they weren’t smeared with blood, and so he looks away. “Who did we lose?”

Dean’s response comes through gritted teeth. “Dobbs, Corbett, and Dewitt.” At the sound of his voice, Castiel glances over, and finds Dean knelt beside another body, that of Private Martin, whose face is being held comfortingly by one of his friends as he cries and screams so that he might not see his injury. Dean’s hands are greasy and dark red as he frantically presses a blood-sodden chunk of cotton against a miserably spurting hole in his stomach. “Sir, Martin’s gonna need surgery. He needs a hospital, or at the very least a qualified surgical team - we’ve got three wounds here, bullet must’ve bounced off his hipbone, and Christ only knows what it tore on its way back out—”

Castiel nods. “I’ll see if we can get an ambulance truck anywhere nearby. If the 743rd have cleared the highway entrance to Grandcamp, then it should be easy enough to get him back to Vierville.”

Dean doesn't thank him; he's busy.

Castiel sends word over the radio to the other platoons requesting all medical personnel in the company make their way to the *mairie* as soon as possible in order to set up a temporary aid station until ambulance trucks can get through to take casualties back to the hospital set up at Vierville. He gets several of the infantry men to leave whatever meagre first aid kits they have with Dean and those few staying to assist him.

Castiel lets Dean know what's being done before they move out, and expresses a hope that there won't be many more men sent back to him from later confrontations.

"All we do is hope," Dean says. He pauses to wipe sweat from his brow, having removed his helmet some time ago for comfort and ease of movement, and he leaves a dark smear of blood across his forehead. He looks at Castiel. "Anything else, sir?"

"No," Castiel says bluntly, and looks away towards the end of the road where the others are waiting. "Thank you, sergeant."

The road that will take into inner Grandcamp is ahead of now. There are enemy batteries and heavy mortar weapons mounting the sidewalk and brave men propped behind pretty garden walls waiting to kill them. With the exception of one sniper, Baker Company has had a relatively easy day, but now the air is thick with smoke and brick dust, and men on both sides are falling like flies.

Steering clear of the naval bombardments still underway on the coast, Castiel and his company push through to clear the western side of the city, towards where the 743rd Tank Battalion have been trying to

break through the northern strongpoints for some time. They move fast through the narrow lanes and open parks and clusters of shops with the fronts torn off and charred at the roadside. They take two prisoners-of-war in blowing out a gunner position inside a *boulangerie*, and three more at a makeshift barricade of old cars and up-turned furniture halfway down the road to the beach, and all are sent back to Dean Winchester's aid station, where they can be supervised safely, and may even be able to make themselves useful.

They take position by position, a slow, menacing crawl, and wipe out what enemy the 5th Rangers, the 743rd, and the British HMS Glasgow have not yet found. They are shot at. They are pushed back and made to try again, to push harder, to grit their teeth and clench their jaws and run in screaming with bayonets drawn. Castiel leads from the front with shaking hands and he yells himself hoarse and he tries very hard not to die.

Later that day

Grandcamp is all cleared out by nineteen-hundred hours that day; the surrounding villages confirmed as empty or civilian-only by nineteen-thirty; the next town over, that of Gefosse-Fontenay, is taken by twenty-one-hundred hours, and Baker Company is on the march for Isigny-sur-Mer shortly after nightfall.

In the twilight, the city is a perfect coastal lighthouse guiding them in; there are fires still burning in high, hollowed-out buildings, and great columns of smoke twist and billow up from wreckage. It's quiet, though - the fighting is over. Comms on the radio direct them southeast to less damaged parts of the city, where companies Baker through Easy of the 116th will be holding a defensive perimeter until HQ Company catches up tomorrow to hold the town and brief the men on their next move.

Captain Laufeyson from Dog Company goes out to set up the sentry positions on the outskirts and arranges a patrol rota that,

unfortunately, doesn't get around to including Baker's men until past oh-three-hundred hours, although at least it means that they have some downtime now.

The NCOs are sent off to find a place for their respective platoons to stay, and Castiel is just discussing abandoned homes and shops nearby that could potentially be used when a loud, deliberately bratty voice starts up, "You know, the weirdest thing happened - I just asked Gideon where I could find the CO and, man, you won't believe this, but he pointed me over here!"

Castiel looks up to see Inias striding towards him with a grin stretched ear to ear like he thinks he's hilarious. He's limping a little, and has a bust lip, but he's still talking absolute shit, so clearly he's fine. Castiel presses his lips into a tight line and tries not to smile.

"They said to look for some guy," Inias goes on, his grin only broadening once he sees that he's got Castiel's attention, and he holds his hand up about level with the top of his head, "about ye tall, skinny, kind of a jackass, to be honest. You wouldn't happen to know where I could find one of those, would you?"

Castiel casts him a withering look. "Very funny."

Inias comes to stop right in front of Castiel, and he beams. "I'm hilarious."

Without further warning, then, he wraps Castiel up in the kind of awkward, bone-crushing hug that he used to favour when relishing a success after winning some high school baseball game, but for once Castiel doesn't complain or try to get out of it. He presses his cheek lightly against the metal side of Inias' helmet, which burns a little, being hot from the sun, and claps one hand briefly on the small of his back to let him know the sentiment is both appreciated and returned.

When Inias finally lets go of him, he takes a step back, but it seems he's not yet done with expressions of fondness, as he slaps Castiel twice on one cheek affectionately, still grinning wide, and goes on to say, "Congrats, anyway. So what happened to the captain?"

"A bullet to the eye," Castiel says, not bothering to sugar-coat it. He's already answered the question a thousand times over, as well as the accompanying judgemental looks that try to figure out whether he'll be able to cope. He looks down at the ground with a loose, non-committal shrug of the shoulders, and ignores the painful twinge down one arm from his healing shrapnel wound that it causes.

Inias winces. "Yikes."

"Yeah. Fun for all the family." Castiel tries not to think about it too much - the dark thread of blood twisting down from the Milton's blackened, hollow eye socket; his open mouth, his stained teeth, the way he'd bitten his tongue nearly clean in two - and changes the topic. "So where have you been?"

"Heaven knows what happened to our LCVP but we landed way east, ended up in Easy Red," Inias explains, and he makes a face. "It was chaos, don't ask me what happened, but I managed to keep most of the men together, found another couple of teams when we got into Saint Laurent - there were at least three battalions stuck there, couldn't get through to Vierville, and then when we finally did, we get told that our CO's already off west along the highway without us!"

"Sorry," Castiel says, and feebly attempts to excuse himself with, "Orders."

"No, I'm kidding - it's fine, really. We got to hang out with the 115th,

clear out some quaint little rural villages, destroy some farmhouses, all the good stuff." Inias glances around their surroundings with a disappointed twist to his mouth. "I wish I could say that we did this, but Isigny was torched before we even got here. We can thank the British Navy for that one. Next to no resistance at all."

Castiel's only response to that is a short huff under his breath, and he jerks his head in the direction of the road out of town to indicate that they should take a walk. Inias heads off first, away from the main square, and then slows to allow Castiel to lead the way or fall into step.

"So what's going on with you?" Inias asks as they pick their way through the rubble.

"Commanding," Castiel says after a moment. "Organising attacks, keeping admin running smoothly. You know. Keeping track of losses."

Inias looks sharply across at him. "Losses?"

Castiel lets his breath slowly, in one long deflation. "Put it this way. Be grateful you landed on Easy Red."

"Jeez."

They walk in silence for several paces, and Castiel is grateful that Inias doesn't ask who, or how, or whether it was easy to just walk away and keep going. He figures Inias' little ragtag platoon must have lost men as well, and the same questions rise in his throat, but he saves them for a time, later, when he has to sit down to reports and letters back to HQ. He can deal with names, then, like curls of paper pulled from a straw hat to be unfolded and disposed of.

“I got a chunk of shrapnel in my shoulder,” Castiel says abruptly, just for a change of conversation.

“For real?” Inias raises his eyebrows. “Which one?”

Castiel pats the front of the offending shoulder.

Inias pulls a face that treads a faint, unclear line between impressed and horrified. “Well, damn. Is it still in there, or…?”

“No. Winchester got it out.”

“Oh.”

Castiel glances over at Inias; there was something weighted in that ‘*oh*’, something that Inias would like to think he’s too mature and surreptitious to overtly express - but he has all the subtlety of a firework in a garden shed. “What?”

“He’s doing a good job, then!” Inias declares emphatically, with a nod so vigorous he could pull a muscle. “Working well with the company and all that. I know you were worried about him disrupting stuff.”

“Oh, yeah.” Castiel looks ahead. “Yeah, he’s - he’s good.”

“So he’s not… disrupting anything?”

Castiel understands what now what Inias is getting at, and he resents it. He doesn't answer for a moment, choosing instead to focus on the gravel crunch beneath his feet, the ash and brick dust drifting loosely across the road surface to leave dirty scuffs on the leather of his boots. "No," he says at last. He clears his throat, inhales in a short sniff like he's got a cold coming on, some excuse for his behaviour - if he had any poor behaviour to excuse, that is, which he doesn't, because everything is fine. "No, he's good. I mean. Adequate."

"Adequate," Inias repeats, almost rolling the word off his tongue to taste it, but he doesn't say any more.

They walk a little longer, and they talk sporadically - sometimes they discuss movements, attacks they've undergone so far, whether Europe is the way they imagined it, funny stories they've heard from the men in the past days; in between anecdotes, they tread a slow, careful path which curves in a lazy arc to take them back to their own base.

As they return to the top of the street on which the majority of Baker Company are situated, Inias crows a delighted laugh and exclaims, "So Gallagher made it, then! Good - he was wagering with all the boys whether he'd kill a hundred Krauts on the first day."

"I don't know that he achieved that," Castiel remarks drily. "He twisted his ankle on the first battery assault."

"Sounds just like him." Inias slings a hand up in the air and calls over to him. "Gallagher!" Andy looks up, surprised, and then his face splits into an easy grin as Inias goes on, "Did you get a hundred, then, or did you decide to go easy on them?"

"A hundred? A *thousand,* sir," Gallagher yells back, all giddy bravado. "Haven't you heard? The Germans are all cleared out of Europe! We're going home tomorrow!"

Inias laughs at that, and even Castiel lets the beginnings of a smile tilt at his mouth. Inias turns to Castiel, then, and slaps a hand to his forearm. “I’m going to go over and catch up with the others - are you staying, or have you got things to do?” he asks.

Castiel looks across at where his men are, loose-limbed and light-hearted as they lounge on the sidewalk, sit in doorways, and stand around in groups to bitch and chat and eat their rations in the ever-fading light of evening. It looks like a nice way to spend the final hours of one’s day, but not for Castiel. He squints. “Things to do. I need to find out where the officers are staying, and then there’s paperwork - assault reports, cas-amm write-ups, you know.”

Inias grimaces. “What fun.”

Castiel shrugs.

“Alright, then. I’ll come find you later,” Inias says, and reaches out fingertips to drum a rhythm on the top of Castiel’s helmet, which shakes all through his skull, and when Castiel scowls, Inias just grins wider. “Don’t work yourself too hard, babe,” he adds, and drops his hand from Castiel’s head to his good shoulder, and squeezes it gently. “See you around.”

Castiel watches him go, and it’s only once Inias is being welcomed with cheers and stupid quips and the offer of coffee that he turns to leave. He finds Sergeant Campbell nearby, drinking what does not look like water out of his canteen, and asks whether accommodation has been set out.

“Yes, sir,” Campbell says, and seems either very eager to help or very suspicious as he hurries to put the cap back on his canteen and tuck it

away into his haversack. “Baker Company officers are over on Rue Aristide Briand, in a little apartment behind the butchers’ shop, with NCOs next door in the post office, and then the enlisted men all in each of the buildings after that. Divided by platoon, sir. You, though, you’re on the other side of those buildings, the next street along, with the rest of the company commanding officers and a couple of HQ staff. Those are just regular houses there, lived in or something close to that. You’re number 32, I think.”

Castiel nods. “Thank you,” he says. “I’ll come around later to check on everyone. Be sure that they all get fed and bed - once they’ve prepped their weapons for tomorrow. If you’re low on cleaning kits, let me know.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“That’ll be all, sergeant,” Castiel tells him, and as Campbell turns to head back down to the other end of the street where the rest of the men are staying, Castiel turns the other way in search of his own accommodation. As it happens, number 32 isn’t hard to find, despite being narrow and set-back from the sidewalk, its stone walls painted a cracked and dusty green, with its shutters peeling. He supposes it could be said to have a lot of character, and he climbs the steps to the front door.

Castiel knocks once before entering, and even then he goes with his rifle tucked into his shoulder and made ready. He doesn’t entirely trust that this abandoned family house will be without some young, determined German soldier about to decide that his best bet for survival is to lurk in a corner somewhere and then spring out with bayonet drawn at the first unlucky American to stroll in. He sweeps every room, checks every cupboard, and treads carefully near all windows and doors for fear of mines or other booby-traps left behind. It’s safe, he concludes, but all the same he blocks off the majority of the house with bricks and wooden chairs piled into doorways, keeping only the empty front room and the dingy, green-tiled bathroom for use.

He leans against the wall across the front door and slowly sinks down to sit cross-legged. There, with the only easily usable exit in clear view, and with his helmet removed to be cast into a distant corner where he doesn't have to think about its weight or its sweat-encrusted headband, he pulls out sheets of paper and a pen. He's heard officers say that leading men into battle is the easiest part of commissioning; the challenge is the paperwork. Nonetheless, it has to be done.

He has only organised all of his papers into a rational, comprehensive order when Inias comes in. He has the list of Baker Company's men by his left knee, usable assets by his right, and loose sheafs between his legs on which to work what is to be done with regards to both.

"Hey," Inias says cheerily, and he loosens his chinstrap with one hand as he crosses the room. "How are you doing?"

"I'm just sorting out the company now that we've got everybody back together again," Castiel says. He frowns, then, and reluctantly amends, "Or at least, almost everybody."

Inias grimaces. "I figure you've got to rearrange some things, huh."

"Yeah." Castiel scratches the back of his head and then uses the other hand, complete with pen, to gesture ambiguously at the selection of papers before him. "It's a joy, as you can probably tell."

Inias squats down, one hand propped on each of his knees, and shifts his weight to sit on his own heels so that he can tilt forwards to peer at Castiel's paperwork. "What are you thinking, so far?" he asks.

Castiel drums the tip of his pen against the desktop. "I'm going to put

Lieutenant Virgil as 2IC," he says idly, already lost in thoughts of the next role reallocation.

"Oh." Inias straightens up. "Okay."

Castiel detects a note of disappointment in Inias' tone, and he glances up from his papers to verify this fact; Inias' face is resolutely set, but there's a slight downwards turn to his lips. He seems to know this, and so looks quickly away, staring down at the desk as though thoroughly wrapped up in what he sees there. Castiel sets his pen down. "Inias."

"Hm?" Inias doesn't look up. Still seemingly fascinated by Castiel's rather thoughtless, mundane task, his eyes move steadily across the paper to track the other names listed there.

"Inias, don't give me that face," Castiel says, his voice strained in his throat. "I can't give you 2IC."

"Okay."

There is no way to get around this without just being blunt. "Inias," Castiel starts severely, "the only way that role would come to you would be if I was incapacitated - potentially fatally - in which case, I can't entirely trust that you would be emotionally capable of supporting the company." He pauses to contemplate whether his words have been too harsh, and awkwardly adds, "No offense."

Inias lets out a long breath. "None taken," he says. "I guess. No, I get it - friends don't make friends their understudies in the event of them being killed. Right?"

“Right.” Castiel looks at him with an expression that he hopes conveys a sort of gentle reassurance that, were circumstances different, Inias would of course be his first choice. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Inias jerks a dismissive shrug. “Virgil will do it well. Kind of an asshole, but I’ll admit he’s good. What else are you thinking?”

Castiel just looks at him for a second, wondering at Inias’ endless capacity to hold no grudges, to work tirelessly at the job set before him without regard for emotional bias or personal circumstance, and he wonders if perhaps Inias would have been the right choice after all. Inias’ eyes flash up and meet Castiel’s, then, and he realises that he’s been asked a question.

He looks down at his papers and starts up idly spinning his pen between index and middle fingers. “Sergeant Milligan will take over from me as commander of one-platoon, which means all the platoon’s squads are going to be mixed up, but I think as long as there’s a good replacement section IC - say, Corporal Mills, or Harvelle - then they should be able to sort themselves out.” Castiel narrows his eyes. “And we’ll need a new first Sergeant, too.”

Inias hums thoughtfully. “How about Barnes?”

“That’s what I was thinking. That, or Staff Masters.”

Inias nods. “Masters may bitch, but he’ll get shit done. Barnes gets distracted.”

“You’re right.” Castiel writes Staff Sergeant Mark Masters beneath where Milligan’s name was originally scribbled. The structure of the company may have to shift entirely, but with any luck, it should stay cohesive and functional. Then Castiel pushes the paper, complete with

edits and new additions, towards Inias. “Any opinions on the others?”

Pulling the paper closer to him, Inias takes a moment to read before he shakes his head. “It sounds good.” He pushes it back to Castiel and then, with one hand clamped tight on each kneecap for physical support, heaves himself back up to his feet, groaning as he goes. One knee pops as he stands, and he grimaces. “God, I’m getting too old for this. You hear that? I’ll be assaulting trenches with a walking stick, you watch me.”

“Quit complaining,” Castiel says, but he knows the feeling. He is by no means old - barely twenty-eight, now - but he has soldiers in his company who wouldn’t even legally be able to buy alcohol back home, and they seem quick and sharp with endless energy and still possessing that magical ability held by teenagers and small dogs to bounce back like a rubber ball from any injury. Castiel, by contrast, wounded his shoulder over a week ago and still finds himself occasionally crippled by it at crucial moments.

He doesn’t say any of this, though, not even to Inias, whom he has known since they were flicking spit-balls at the backs of girls’ heads in the fourth grade. The last thing Baker Company needs on top of everything else is a commanding officer teetering on the edge of an existential crisis. Castiel isn’t old; he isn’t weak; he isn’t making mistakes any greater than everyone else’s, even if it may seem that way because of the increased responsibility. He’s fine.

Inias notices Castiel’s silence. “You alright?” he asks.

Castiel glances up, startled. “What? Fine. I’m fine.” He looks away to his papers. “Don’t worry about me.”

“You lost a couple guys today,” Inias says.

“Did I?”

“Cas.”

“I’m *fine,* Inias.” Castiel won’t look up at him. “Really.”

He hears Inias sigh. “Okay. Whatever. I’ll see you later - if you need me, I’ll be over at the apartment behind the butcher’s on the next road over - the *charcuterie*,” Inias says, and all early French lessons aside, he completely butchers the word. He pauses in the middle of the room. “Try not to get too hung up on this shit, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

At last, Inias actually leaves, and he shuts the door tight behind him. The empty front room is all hard walls and stone floors, and without the warm breezes of an orange-skied evening, the house seems cold, and the air stale and dusty. He shifts in his seat, huddles down into his jacket, and tries to settle into a comfortable position where he can work for long periods of time without getting cold or having his legs cramp up.

Castiel has no idea of how much time passes after Inias’ departure - he has deliberately removed his watch and tucked it away inside his combat jacket to keep the ceaseless movement of time away from him - but when Dean comes in, the street that can be glimpsed through the door as he enters is dark and chill with twilight.

“Sir,” Dean says, and strides straight in.

Castiel eyes him. “Permission to enter is denied,” he says, and returns his attention to his paperwork.

Dean stalls in the middle of the room, clearly thrown off by Castiel’s sudden hostility. After a moment, he concludes, “Bullshit.”

Castiel sighs, but doesn’t look up. “It’s not bullshit,” he says irritably, and he flips over one sheet of paper to access Lieutenant Shurley’s notes on ammunition and rations at last count. “It’s protocol. Luckily for you, as it happens, you are allowed in - I was just making a point. You should ask permission to enter.”

“Okay. Permission to enter, sir?”

Castiel sets his pen down on the table and looks up at Dean with an expression that is hard and entirely unamused. “What do you want, Winchester?”

“Me?” Dean puffs out his cheeks with a long, comically exaggerated exhalation. “More money, for one thing. My brother getting the life he wants, for another. Good health! Straight knees would be good, too.” Evidently, Dean thinks he’s cute; he’s wrong. Castiel doesn’t dignify his comments so far with a response, and so eventually, at least, Dean rectifies his answer. “I’ve got the casualty report from Grandcamp here for you, sir.”

Dean crosses the room and stoops to set the papers down to Castiel’s left. Castiel watches him do it - his fingers careful on the edges of the paper so as not to smear the writing, the creak of his boots as he stands up straight again - and then Dean’s eyes move from the sheets of paper to meet Castiel’s. “Thank you,” Castiel says.

Dean nods and sticks his hands deep into the pockets of his combat

pants. His eyes don't leave Castiel's, and it's a moment before Castiel realises that he's just staring tiredly up at Dean like he's got all the answers and the magic power to make everything easy. Dean doesn't.

Castiel drops his gaze to his paperwork - specifically, to the slips of paper that Dean has just added, in which he has recounted all the injuries acquired today, as well as any deaths. He doesn't want to pick it up; he can see the names from here, each of them seeming to be etched with the shadow of a muzzle-flash behind them. Castiel should have known about the sniper.

"So, uh… what are you doing?"

Castiel knows that Dean only means it to be conversational, but he's tired and short-tempered and instead of stopping to appreciate that Dean is try to reach out to him, he says sharply, "None of your business."

For once, Dean doesn't argue. He just shrugs. "Okay."

It is Dean's unusual humility, more than anything, his quiet understanding, that twists guilt in Castiel's gut, and he sighs. "That was rude," he admits with difficulty, his voice low. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Dean says, and Castiel thinks dimly that either someone has replaced his Sergeant Winchester with a very realistic replica, or that somewhere along the line something has changed profoundly between them. "That's your job. Telling me what to do, telling me when to back off, or shut up, or… you know, stop whistling—"

"If I ever hear you whistling again you'll be point man all the way back to Virginia," Castiel cuts in.

Dean grins as wide as a summer horizon, as lazy and warm as one, too. “Doesn’t make any difference to me, sir.” He slaps one hand against the other forearm twice where his medical insignia is sewn. “Red Cross, see? I’m invincible.”

Castiel does see. He doesn’t answer, though; he looks away again, back down to his paperwork, and starts skimming through Dean’s report. Seven casualties - four deaths, three currently undergoing hospital procedures. Castiel’s eyes trace the letters spelling out the names of the dead, over and over, and he tries to imagine being the man who carefully inks those same letters onto the message home for the next-of-kin. Worse still, he imagines being the man who delivers the letter to the next-of-kin. He imagines being the next-of-kin. The report seems lead-heavy in his hand.

“You look exhausted,” Dean comments.

Castiel huffs a short, derogatory laugh. “Incredible. Your powers of observation never cease to amaze.”

If Castiel is being an asshole, Dean ignores it. “You should really get some sleep.”

“I can’t,” Castiel snaps, and he tosses the report down onto the top of his stack of papers, but it doesn’t even slam down satisfactorily; it flutters on the way down and lands gently, several inches away from where he wanted it to be. “I have things to do. A *lot* of things to do. I - I have to…” He breaks off.

As much as he’d like to rant off a long list of all the difficult, soul-destroying tasks that he has been set, he can’t tell Dean any possibly confidential information, and he certainly can’t gripe to subordinates.

He has to remain in an elevated position of respect; he can't be his friend. He's losing his temper, and he can't. Just another responsibility, really - do this, do that, keep them all alive, and bear it in stoic silence. You're not a human being, he reminds himself. You're an officer. He exhales, shakily, and presses the flat of his palm to his forehead to rub in jerky attempts at soothing circles.

"Sir," Dean starts haltingly. He pauses, uncertain, and clears his throat before he goes on. "I don't know whether anyone's said this to you yet, but, uh, I think you're a fine commanding officer."

Castiel laughs.

Dean continues regardless. "I figure my opinion doesn't mean shit to you, but—"

"Your opinion," Castiel interrupts, before he realises that he doesn't know how to continue that sentence, or what exactly he's trying to express with it. Dean is staring at him now, so he tips his head back to meet his eyes, swallows past a thick lump in his throat, and goes on slowly: "…means shit to me. Actually."

A second unusual occurrence in Dean's behaviour: he doesn't have a smart answer. He stands quiet and watches Castiel, waiting for him to go on.

Castiel isn't sure what else to say. He isn't sure what else he *can* say, professionally, without saying too much. "You're honest," he says finally. "I value that."

Dean bobs his head a little, an almost-nod that got lost somewhere. "Uh. Thank you." He hesitates then, and Castiel feels his uncertainty like a change in the weather - does he continue with his attempt to set

Castiel's nerves at ease, or let it go entirely? Does he change his approach, or should he be satisfied with what he's expressed so far? "Sir," he adds, after a moment too long has already passed, and the late addition makes its previous absence all the more noticeable. Dean is still looking at him.

Castiel can feel words bottlenecking in his throat, but he can't open his mouth. He swallows instead, and exhales, long and slow.

Sergeant Winchester, he means to say, and would then go on to ask whether he needs to be somewhere else, because Castiel has paperwork that he needs to finish - except he says it all wrong; he says, "Dean," and his voice is too quiet for the space between them. The realisation that he has said the wrong thing causes all other words to fizzle out completely, and he falls back into silence.

He has never called him Dean before. It sounds like a confession.

Castiel wonders what it would be like to kiss Dean. Just once, not because of a burning need or a heat stoked up so high inside him that its radiative warmth must be tangible from the outside, but just because Dean's mouth looks soft and forgiving, and he could maybe breathe in all that bravado and endless confidence to keep for himself, for the days to come.

Dean hitches a sharp breath, and looks away quickly to stare at his feet as he scuffs them back and forth through the thin layer of ash and dust that coats the unfinished concrete floor. He clears his throat. "I should be going, anyway," he says, too loudly, and pivots on one foot to glance towards the door. "Getting late, you know. I should check on the men."

"You should," Castiel says, and is almost taken aback by the scratched roughness of his own voice inside his mouth.

Dean is caught off guard by it, too; at the sound of it, he looks over his shoulder at Castiel, and his mouth is slightly open, and there's a creeping flush at the base of his jaw that the dim electric lights only just catch. This is a very small room, Castiel thinks, and this is a very still night, and Dean does not have to leave yet, and if he were delayed another ten minutes, no-one would acknowledge the difference and no-one would challenge what transpired in the interval.

Dean is half-turned to leave, still, but making no progress towards the door, and it seems to Castiel that he could say one word, exhale it under his breath so that it could barely be heard, and Dean would stay.

He doesn't say anything.

At last, after what seems like an age, Dean lets out a short, harsh breath, and looks away towards the door. "I'll see you tomorrow, sir," he mutters, and when he leaves, he slams the door.

Castiel releases all the air in his lungs at once, like he's been punched, and tips his head back to rest against the wall behind him.

Chapter 5: Le Riviere d'Elle

13th June, 1944

Dear Sam,

I'm breaking out champagne for you over here – or at least I'm tipping some of my canteen onto the ground for you. A second date? Fucking A, Sammy, I knew you'd wow her. So she had a good time then! And you were worrying for nothing. Are you going for dinner or something this time? Kids in my grade always used to take girls to Piccolo's for a nice night out but things have probably moved on since then – and you college nerds are probably too fancy for Piccolo's anyway. And don't sweat it about dad. He'll be fine, he does this all the time, remember? And every time you freak out like maybe you made him leave, like maybe he's never coming back, and then bam! He's back again and getting on your case about school and work and you gripe that you wish he'd stayed gone. He'll be back soon. Don't worry.

Yeah, Novak's alright. He's being kinda weird. I don't know what's up with him. Well. I gotta suspicion but I don't think it's the kinda thing that'd do too well in a letter that just about anyone could read. I'll tell you one day – if it's still relevant. Anyway, things are going okay over here. We finally got through Grandcamp, praise the freaking lord, so here's hoping that maybe we'll get a goddamn break before we have to run off again for the next big city liberation. Every time I think I'm used to the noise and the fire and the casualties, it gets a little crazier and I feel a little less like I know what I'm doing. I'll tell you one thing, though – when I get back I'm gonna be one hell of a doctor. That shit'll be easier after all this.

Well, there's not a lot else to tell over here. My buddy Benny has a wife back home trying to divorce him for everything he has, so he was pretty excited when I said I knew a pretty good up-and-coming lawyer. That, and he hoped that you might not charge on account of us being friends. I said you'd get him a discount – if he plays his cards right. We'll see if he keeps up a steady supply of smokes. Between you and me? It's not likely.

I'll keep you posted on that, since I know you're so, so interested in the inner workings of the lives of all the guys here. Joe Harvelle says hi again. He also says something terrible about Jessica which I won't pass on. I'll write again soon – look after yourself. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

19th June, 1944

Ever since speaking to Inias about managing Dean within the company, Castiel can't stop thinking about it.

Over the course of the week after Omaha, he had grown used to being around his men - to being around Dean - without Inias around to back him up or tell him stupid jokes or, more commonly, to watch him with careful eyes for when he slips up and makes a mistake. Because, of course, Castiel *will* one day slip up and make a mistake; he always does. Inias means well, Castiel knows, and just wants to be sure that he can intervene if ever a complicated and potentially career-endangering situation should arise, but truthfully, it just makes Castiel nervous. He already knows that he stares too long and talks too much and lets his attention be caught up Dean's mouth and hands and chest when he should be focusing on the job; he doesn't need Inias to tell him as much. It's for this reason that Castiel has so far opted out of informing Inias about how he's already come disturbingly close to kissing Dean, twice. It's something that Castiel doesn't particularly care to think about either.

He's hyperaware of Dean now, though - when Dean shrugs out of his combat jacket at the end of a long day and the cotton of his T-shirt is stained dark with sweat, and Castiel drags his eyes away from where it sticks his chest and stomach, up to his face, only to find Dean already staring at him; when Dean walks by close enough their knuckles brush, and Castiel jumps as though scalded; when Dean bends low, right in front of Castiel, to re-tie his boot laces, and the way his combat pants stretch tight over his thighs, even before Dean self-consciously runs his palms down the fabric to smooth and loosen it. Dean does these things in front of Castiel, constantly. There is a part of Castiel which occasionally wonders if Dean is in fact doing these things *for* Castiel. There's something about the way he always looks at Castiel afterwards, an anxious little glance like he's looking for some response of Castiel's but wishes his search to go undetected. Castiel has no idea what that means, then, and what he's supposed to do about it, if anything.

For now, he has more important business to cater to, such as the twenty-mile march to Saint Lo, so he leaves it alone. He doesn't even think about it, because stupid ideas lead him to stupid actions, and he goes about his business as usual - albeit highly strung, rabbit-nervous, and, nine times out of ten, so painfully aroused that he can barely see straight. These are hardly ideal circumstances for command, but as long as Dean doesn't draw too much attention to himself, then Castiel can get along just fine.

25th June, 1944

They move through captured Carentan, treading lightly through the rubble and dust, and then east for Saint Lo along the River Elle. The terrain is flat and open, for the most part unoccupied, and entirely dull. Since Grandcamp, they have encountered one rag-tag band of German infantrymen without a leading officer, all of whom surrendered instantly in fear for their lives, and turned themselves

over to the regimental officers to be administrated as prisoners-of-war. Aside from that, there has been little other than crops and cows and little stone houses where women are putting out their washing in the sunshine.

Near Neuilly-la-Forêt, they stop for the night, setting up a triangular harbour area with three points of defence, and since they've been walking near enough non-stop for ten hours, Castiel lets them have an easy evening. However, Castiel cannot help but notice that wherever there is no trouble, some men will go to any lengths to be sure that some is provoked.

By twenty-two-hundred hours, there has already been a small fight in four-platoon, the result of some arrogant squirt of an artillery private, Jesse Turner, threatening to beat the crap out of a private twice his size; Corporals Richardson and Lowell get into an argument after Richardson tells Lowell that he's going to piss in his canteen if he hears him singing Glen Miller one more time; Sergeant Masters cheats Corporal Mills at blackjack and they are now apparently not speaking to each other, since Masters won't admit to having done anything wrong.

Sometimes Castiel thinks it would be easier to run a goddamn kindergarten.

From nearby, Private Spruce spits out a mouthful of rations and makes a loud gagging sound. "Jesus, this tastes like ass," he exclaims.

"Why, Kenny, I didn't realise you were so familiar with the taste," Kris Chambers says drily, and ducks down with a laugh to avoid the remainder of Fitzgerald's ration that gets tossed at his head.

"Yeah, your sister liked it," Spruce retorts.

Kris just keeps laughing. “You fuckin’ moron, I don’t have a sister,” he says, and he throws the disgusting ration back – only he throws it harder, and with better aim, and it hits Spruce square in the face.

Milligan claps his hands like he’s breaking up two bickering dogs. “Settle down, children, come on.”

“Chambers started it,” Spruce mutters.

Milligan rolls his eyes, and Castiel, from the other side of the platoon, can only admire his infinite patience. “And I’m finishing it,” Milligan tells them. “C’mon, guys, what are you, third-graders? Grow up.”

“Ain’t their fault they’re bored,” Corporal Ash Lowell chimes in from where he is elegantly sprawled backwards over his haversack, head resting on his musette bag, for a nap. “We been walking for days without seeing any action – we’re all getting cabin fever.”

Beside Lowell is Harvelle, who promptly lifts his head to interrupt, his face settled in deadly irritation. “Oh, I’m sorry, would you rather we get engaged by Krauts right this second?” he demands, eyebrows sharply raised. “Personally, I’m pretty thankful to have gone that long without getting shot at.”

“I’ll second that,” Dean adds, from where he is knelt over his musette bag to check medical equipment, and he looks up briefly to grin across at the others.

Someone snickers. “Pussy.”

Harvelle sits up. “Who the fuck said that?”

Gallagher laughs hysterically, and so whether or not he was the one who said it, he is the one Harvelle goes far when he gets up and marches across to put the fear of God into men.

“Maybe we should start pitching Harvelle against people in fights to death for entertainment,” Benny Lafitte comments, and his cigarette shifts in his mouth as he smirks. “See how long they last before Joe’s shitting down their throats.”

“Yeah – bare-knuckle boxing and shit,” Private Miller says.

Doe snorts. “Yeah, you’d like to see them bare-something alright.”

Miller kicks him in the thigh. “Hey, I’m not a fucking queer!”

Lafitte just chuckles, letting out a plume of faint smoke, while the other men fall about in hoots of exclamations about Miller bare-backing some sweet German country shepherd.

Castiel lights a cigarette.

As the men calm down, he exhales smoke, and says, “I want patrols out north and west of here at eighteen-hundred-hours.” He doesn’t raise his voice; he doesn’t make any effort to get the platoon’s attention first. He just speaks, and the NCOs instantly snap around to look at him, ready. He looks up from the smouldering end of his cigarette, and glances over at them – meeting the eyes of the NCOs one at a time. “Harvelle, take the north. Lafitte, you go west. And Milligan, go tell First Lieutenant Hester to switch over the defensive

positions. Two-platoon must be getting tired – put them in reserve and get three-platoon up there."

Milligan gives a curt nod. "Yes, sir." He gets up.

"Defusing pointless arguments, a fine art form: here demonstrated masterfully by the lieutenant," Corporal Mills says theatrically, with a faintly Shakespearean hand gesture in Castiel's direction.

"It is a gift," Castiel says around his cigarette.

"Sir, you don't wanna get involved in our bare-knuckle boxing ring, then?" Lafitte asks loudly. "You don't think you could take Harvelle?"

"Corporal," Castiel says, voice rough with cigarette smoke, and through the pale grey twist of it, he sees Dean look up at him across the other soldiers; he ignores him, and goes on, "how am I supposed to take my company through France to kill Germans if I'm knocking all my NCOs into the dust?"

"What do you mean, all your NCOs, sir?" Lafitte asks.

Castiel raises his eyebrows. "You're next."

Lafitte lets out a roaring full-body laugh at that, tipping back where he sits – but of all the non-coms giggling like little kids at Castiel's idle threats, Dean laughs the loudest. Castiel glances at him and away again. He takes a pull on his cigarette.

“Alright, show’s over,” he says, and hauls himself to his feet. He picks up his rifle, slings it over his shoulder, and takes his cigarette out of his mouth to let out a plume of smoke. “I want noise and light pollution winding down now, strictly tactical by twenty-three-hundred hours. NCOs on me.”

With wearing groans and small noises of complaints, the men start making lazy motions towards putting their stuff away, while the non-commissioned officers drag themselves up and head over his way. He beckons with one hand and leads them a short distance from the rest of the enlisted soldiers, and waits until they’re all present.

“Alright, here’s the drill - check on your squads. Make sure weapons are clean, report any injuries to Winchester, any shortages to First Sergeant Masters. Check on their shell-scrapings. Ensure they’ve all got their sentry rotas down somewhere and otherwise, get some shut-eye. We’ve got a lot of walking tomorrow.”

“Never would have guessed, lieutenant,” Masters drawls.

Castiel looks tiredly at the sergeant; he doesn’t need to tell him to shut up. “Reveille is at oh-five-hundred hours tomorrow and I want us moving out by oh-six-hundred. We’ll be moving towards Saint Fromand but I’ll give clearer orders on that in the morning. Corporal Harvelle, head around to the other platoons and make sure they’re all on similar orders.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Any questions?” Castiel asks, looking around at the group before him. They glance up from their notebooks and shake their heads or mumble their dissent, so there isn’t much else he has to say to them. “Alright. Make sure you get some rest. You’re dismissed.”

The NCOs turn, one by one and in small groups of friends, and they head back towards their soldiers to pass on the orders and sort everyone out for the night. In their absence, Castiel takes a moment to dig through the pockets of his combat jacket and find his assorted maps and notebooks to check the plan for tomorrow and consider whether he should attempt to communicate with Battalion HQ for further intel about German movements nearby.

The route along the Elle seems mostly rural, including a long detour around a canal system that battalion staff have deemed it would be too complicated to cross, but Castiel has no doubt that their journey will be interspersed with handy little Germans strongholds. He sighs.

He lowers his map and looks out across the camp. There are still a few smouldering lights here and there, from cigarette butts being burned down to the last stub, or from soldiers finishing off the last of their meals in the dim glow of their hexi-stoves. Then there is an entirely different light – a bright white light that only flashes out occasionally, spending most of its time sheltered between careful hands – which Castiel recognise from afar as being Dean's headlamp.

For a few moments, Castiel squints at the light, lifting one hand to guard his eyes from the glare of it, and he tries to decide if he should go over to see him. He weighs the pros and cons. In his head, there are no real pros; there are plenty of cons. The simple words 'Dean Winchester' occupy an entire bullet-point in his brain, beneath the column of reasons why not to go anywhere near him. Dean is bad for Castiel – this much he knows for certain.

Castiel crosses the harbour area towards him.

"Evening, sir," Dean says cheerily, looking up as Castiel approaches.

Castiel nods. “Winchester.”

Dean returns his attention to his work for the time; he is sorting through the contents of his haversack and musette bag, re-organising his medical supplies. From what Castiel can tell, he seems to be absolutely swimming in morphine syringes, but has next to nothing in the way of bandages.

“Do you have enough morphine, there?” Castiel says drily, at a loss for anything else to say but vaguely aware that social convention stipulates that he should contribute something towards conversation, having made the move to join Dean.

“No, actually,” Dean says, and his eyes briefly flash up to meet Castiel’s, with raised eyebrows as if to say, *so there, smartass*, before he goes back to arranging his bags. “I’m supposed to have twice this amount. I guess the Battalion aid station is a little busy with other things at the moment, or something.” He stuffs a couple rolls of bandages into one pocket at the side of his haversack, and then rolls up the syringes safely into a small compartmentalised bag, like their cleaning equipment. With this still in his hands, he glances up at Castiel and frowns. “You wanna sit down or anything, sir?”

Castiel eyes the haversack next to Dean, which does look comfortable, but something about the very idea of sitting down casually beside Dean Winchester and making idle conversation gets under his skin and makes him itch. “No.”

His refusal doesn’t seem to amend matters, however, as Dean simply gives him a cocky wink and says, “Just come to observe, then,” and Castiel doesn’t have an answer for that, short of flushing red, so he just narrows his eyes at Dean in irritation. Dean isn’t fazed by it, though; he just grins up at Castiel like he’s still convinced he’s the cutest son of a bitch alive. Castiel doesn’t give himself time to consider whether this fact may, in fact, be true.

Dean stuffs away the last of his equipment into his bags, and reaches up to switch off his headlamp. The night that they are both plunged into is darker than anticipated, the sun having nearly disappeared entirely below the horizon, and Dean becomes little more than an indistinct outline.

Out of the shadows come tentative footsteps, and then a voice comes: “Lieutenant Novak?”

Castiel recognises it as Private Gideon, and he lifts a hand to be enlarge his silhouette so as to be seen in the dark. “Here, private.”

With some prolonged shuffling around and under low-hanging branches, Private Gideon comes over to stands at the side of Dean’s shell scraping. “I just maybe you’d like some coffee, sir?”

“That’s generous, thank you,” Castiel says, and takes the metal cup from Gideon’s outstretched hands. “Are you alright?”

Gideon gives a loose shrug. “Can’t complain, sir.”

“You’ve got everything you need?”

“As best I know, sir.”

Castiel nods. “That’s good.” He takes a sip of the coffee, which he finds to be positively scalding; he lowers it and looks up at Gideon again. “Make sure you get some rest tonight. When are you on sentry?”

“Not ‘til three A.M – oh-three-hundred, that is – so I’ve got a while yet.”

Dean grins up at Gideon. “Looks like someone drew the short straw, huh,” he says. “What’d you do to piss off your platoon leader?”

Gideon falters. “Nothing? At least, I don’t think—”

“Don’t mind Winchester,” Castiel cuts in, and he shoots Dean a silencing look before he returns his gaze warmly to Gideon. “He’s joking.”

“Oh.” Glancing between them uncertainly, Gideon clears his throat and says, “Well, if it’s alright, sir, I’d better be going. Good night, sir, sergeant.”

Castiel thanks him again for the coffee and lets him pick his way through the darkening night back to his own shell scraping.

“You really like these dumb kids, don’t you?” Dean says, out of nowhere.

Castiel looks over in surprise and finds Dean watching him, his eyes contemplative. There’s nothing mocking in his look, nothing judgemental – it’s just a statement of fact. For a moment, Castiel feels as though he needs to wait for the punchline; Dean isn’t one to just make idle conversation, most of the time. However, Castiel only needs to glance at him to see that there is no punchline.

“And you don’t?” Castiel asks, and he lowers his eyes to his mug of coffee so that he doesn’t have to look into Dean’s quiet consideration of him any longer.

Dean shrugs. “I like ‘em enough. Some of them are dicks, but they’re good. The NCOs and me, we get on great. But these kids?” He shakes his head.

“What about them?”

“Nothing. It’s just…” Dean looks up, his face slightly screwed up as he thinks his answer through, and in the thin silvering light of the evening, Castiel can see the etches of a frown still there as he looks over at Castiel again. “A lot of officers don’t give them the time of day, you know? They’ve got a ten dozen men to watch over, they feel they can’t spend their time getting to know every goddamn private, which is their right, I guess, but.”

“But I’m different,” Castiel summarises.

“Hey, it’s not a bad thing. You’re not soft or anything, you’re just. I don’t know.” Dean hesitates; privately, Castiel thinks that he pauses for a second too long. “Kind, maybe.”

“I’m an asshole.”

Dean laughs. “Yeah, you’d like us to think so.”

Castiel eyes him over the rim of his coffee mug. “Do you want to test me?”

“Uh, no, sir,” Dean says quickly.

Castiel nods, satisfied, but he can’t help but smirk slightly at that, and against all his better judgement, he sits down beside Dean, stretches his legs out alongside Dean’s into the deepest part of the shell-scraping.

Dean looks over at him with some amusement as he settles down onto the ground, but thankfully, he doesn’t make any snide or irritating comment. Castiel offers him his mug of coffee, but Dean politely declines, instead choosing to rummage through his haversack for a ration pack to dig into.

For a few minutes they just sit there, in the dark and under the thinly stretched grey of the clouds – Dean selecting a ration pack, Castiel sipping his coffee – and then Castiel says, “Tell me about Sam.”

Dean looks up in surprise, and his hands stall in their attempt to rip open his ration pack. “What do you want to know?” he asks, seeming a little perturbed by the request.

Castiel rolls his eyes. “You’ve got a baby brother anecdote for every conversation you find yourself in, and now you’re telling me that the one time someone is genuinely interested, you can’t think of anything.”

That gets a short laugh, and then Dean settles down to a frown and twisted of mouth of deep contemplation. He turns his ration pack over and over, slowly, in his hands. “He’s nineteen,” he says, at last. “Part-time pre-law student at a college in Lawrence.”

Castiel nods. “Highly respectable career choice.”

“I know! Guess who got all the brains of the family, right?” Dean laughs again, and as he shakes his head, he finally succeeds in tearing a clean strip of foil off the top of his ration pack. “I mean, our dad wasn’t so sure, but Sam’s never let any of the bullshit he spouts stop him before so, yeah. Me, not so much, but Sammy’s good like that.” He jabs into the packet with a small, twisted fork and twirls it around inside. “This one time dad wanted to go away on some lousy hunting trip for the weekend, and drag us both with him – but see, Sam had this school dance he’d been dying to go to, and he’d been absolutely stoked about it, and when he found out dad wanted him to just… bail?” Dean shakes his head. He stabs a chunk of mangled mystery meat and pokes it decisively into his mouth. “No way, man. You should have seen the argument they had – but Sam did get to the dance, so! He won out in the end. And good for him, as well! If I remember correctly, he had his first kiss at that dance. Some girl called Madison, I think.”

“And you?” Castiel asks.

Dean stares at him, seemingly confused. “What about me?”

“Did you go to the dance?”

“Oh, no way,” Dean says, as he understands, and it seems to Castiel that the answer is somewhat knee-jerk. “I went on the hunting trip.”

Castiel doesn’t know what to say to that. He just looks at Dean – at the curve of his smile, his thoughts clearly still focused on Sam – and he doesn’t say anything.

“No, I never could have done like Sam did,” Dean goes on, and he

swirls his fork back in his ration pack in search of another meatball. “I tell you, that kid’s argumentative as shit sometimes but I have to admit, he’s got bigger balls than I have. No wonder he’s gonna be a lawyer – he’s gonna be the best lawyer in the Mid-West, I tell you now.” Dean pulls his fork out of his ration pack, and in spite of it still having a piece of meat impaled on the tines, he points it at Castiel. “Hand on heart. Sam Winchester. You’ll hear about him.”

“I’m sure I will,” Castiel says, and is somewhat surprised by his own sincerity. He is not one for humouring people, nor for simply taking their word for conditional things – and yet, for some reason, with Dean, he is convinced. “Did he not get drafted?”

“4F. He has real bad asthma.”

Castiel smiles. “Your greatest relief, I’m sure.”

“Yeah,” he says, and he laughs again. “I wouldn’t have wanted him here. I mean, he’d have been able to look after himself - hell, he probably would’ve even be good, especially as an officer, since he’s such a smart kid - but… you know. The idea of him out here, and me not knowing where he was, if he was okay? No way.” Dean eats a piece of his meat, and then winks to peer with one eye down into the packet. “I think this is empty… But no, it’s better like this. Him at school, me over here looking out for him. Let him have his books and his girls - well, girl. There’s this one art student. I’m still hearing how it goes. Apparently her name’s Jessica? Blonde hair. Likes Monet – or Manet? I don’t know the difference. Prettiest girl in his art history class, so. She sounds great.”

Castiel almost doesn’t ask. He almost holds himself back, and then somehow it rushes out of his mouth without his bidding: “And your girl?”

Dean just gives a snort. “My girl? You gotta be kidding me.” He spends a couple seconds folding away his empty ration pack into a side pocket of his haversack, and then looks up at Castiel, still grinning. The smile fades from his face when he sees Castiel continuing to stare evenly at him. “What? You’re serious?”

“Well, are you married or—?” Castiel asks.

“Sir, I don’t have a girlfriend, I certainly don’t have a wife. Look at me - I’m an asshole.” Dean holds his arms out akimbo. “Who’d want to stick around this for long?”

Castiel’s words stick in his throat. He looks down, and after a beat, he says, “I apologise,” and then, by way of explanation, goes on, “I saw you had a photograph in your helmet - a lot of men do - and I just assumed… I’m sorry. It’s not my business.”

“Oh, that.” Dean’s mouth twists up. “Yeah, I do, but it’s not… it’s – my mother, actually,” he admits.

Without his meaning to, Castiel’s eyebrows lift slightly – whatever he was expecting, he never would have figured that Dean was one of *those* boys.

Dean makes a low, grouchy noise in his throat and scowls at Castiel. “Hey, don’t give me that look. It’s not like that.” He looks away, and after a moment, he picks his helmet up from the ground, turns it over carefully in his hands. It’s a little scuffed on the top, but overall the helmet treated with care; he hasn’t graffitied it, or defaced the Baker Company insignia in any way. Something about it, the tired, worn-out sturdiness of it, reminds Castiel of Dean. “She, uh,” Dean starts, and then hesitates. “She died when I was a kid.”

Castiel averts his eyes. “My condolences.”

Dean jerks his shoulders in a non-committal shrug. “It’s okay. It’s just —” He cuts himself off with a shake of his head. “Nothing. Never mind.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry, sir,” Dean says, and he gives a short laugh to dismiss the topic. “It’s kinda stupid, is all.”

Castiel levels him a steady, unfaltering look. “Try me.”

Dean meets his eyes – only fleetingly, his gaze flickering away with uncertainty – and looks back at his helmet, considering. “Okay,” he says, eyebrows lifted in a slightly comedic way, as though this is some silly, light-hearted story that he tells everyone, that there’s nothing special in it, and that Castiel was going to regret having forced such a ridiculous thing out of him. “Okay, so. My mother had this thing, back when I was a kid, of telling me that angels were watching over me. When I was going to sleep, or whatever – so I didn’t have nightmares.”

The big smile that Dean had plastered on his face at the start of this explanation is fading at the corners now, taking with it his whole screen of the lovable idiot, the guy at the back of the platoon who cracks jokes and stitches up scrapes, tells dumb stories and accumulates friends everywhere he goes, never takes a damn thing seriously. He takes a deep breath.

“Yeah. I guess I just got into the habit, or superstition, I don’t know – of keeping a picture of her in my wallet, after she died. Only I don’t exactly have a wallet here, so…” Dean trails off, with another shrug, and holds up his helmet, where the back of the photograph is still

clearly visible, neatly folded and tucked away into his headband. “There you go.”

Castiel nods. “Can I see?”

Dean does grin a little at that. “What, you want me to show you my girl?” he teases, but after a moment, his eyes moving over Castiel’s face as though to assess the safety of his mother with him, he takes the photograph out and passes it over.

Castiel handles it carefully; he unfolds the photograph with slow, precise movements, in case the paper is wet and might stick to itself. However, it’s in good condition, all things considered, and it opens easily along four creases etched deep into the paper from countless times being unfolded and re-folded.

The photograph depicts a woman in black-and-white, a close-up on a young face that is somewhat screwed up against bright sunlight, one hand lifted to hold back long wisps of fair hair that threaten to spill over onto her face. She’s laughing at something. Dean has a great deal of her in his face – the wide eyes, the soft mouth, the spattering of freckles – but by far their greatest resemblance is in expression. There is a comfortable easiness to her smile. She looks comforting.

“She was lovely,” Castiel says.

“Hey, don’t go beating off over my mom, now.”

Castiel rolls his eyes, and hands the picture back. Dean takes it from him and spends some time folding it up again, the corners and edges perfectly aligned along all the old creases, and he tucks it back securely into his helmet. Watching him, Castiel realises that Dean Winchester is a great deal softer than he looks.

Castiel says, gently, “Thank you.”

Dean looks up with an abrupt jerk of the head, and whatever tenderness there was in his face a moment ago is cut up by a frown of bewilderment. “Huh? For what?”

Maybe Dean’s not willing to admit, even subconsciously, that showing someone a private, personal photograph of his deceased mother is anything important, but Castiel won’t be the one to push the issue. He pushes himself to his feet, dusts off his combat pants, and picks up his rifle from the ground. After a moment, he says, “Good company,” and gives Dean a nod, and leaves it at that.

Dean’s frown doesn’t ease up, and he just looks at Castiel as though he’s decoding him somehow. “We’re not friends, sir,” he says hesitantly.

Castiel stares down at him. “No,” he responds, after a beat, and then he doesn’t know what comes over him, but he crouches down, one knee in the dirt, so that he’s back on Dean’s level, with less than a foot of space between them. Like that, he is close enough that he can see Dean’s eyelashes, silver-tipped in the emerging moonlight, flicker nervously as his eyes move over Castiel’s face; he can see, faintly, the freckles on the bridge of Dean’s nose, the shape of his mouth. He says, “We’re not.”

Dean’s eyes close.

He makes himself vulnerable, with his lips slightly parted; he rids himself of all responsibility, with his eyes closed, saying *do it. do it* – and he exhales, a long, shaky breath that plays across Castiel’s face and drags goosebumps up along his arms, the nape of his neck. There

is his mouth and there is the sweet, dry curve of his throat, and there is the place where his combat T-shirt doesn't fit him quite right, tight across his chest and his shoulders and where his clavicle sits thickly, solidly, under his skin, and Dean's closed eyes tell Castiel to just do it, already.

Castiel doesn't kiss him, but he thinks about it. He thinks about it as he walks away.

1st July, 1944

And so Castiel's frustrations mount and mount, with absolutely no outlet for escape. His mornings are marching, his afternoons patrols, his evenings full of paperwork, and any spare time between these activities are spent in the company of some seventy-odd men all vying for his attention, to chat and joke and gripe and bitch - and Dean Winchester.

He finds himself attempting to discreetly palm himself through his combats whenever possible - through his pocket, when unobserved, or when trying, with great difficulty, to pee, and he finds himself unable to sleep comfortably within earshot of other officers for fear of what he might say or do in his sleep. Every waking moment seems electricity-charged.

Their orders are simply to march for Saint Fromand and take out any German positions they encounter along the way, and so far the path they are taking has proved exceedingly uneventful, bordering on dull. There is nothing to do but walk, and talk, and look at Dean Winchester, and it is gradually wearing Castiel down.

At first, the idea of sneaking away from his platoon to relieve himself seemed absolutely ridiculous, but the tension is becoming unbearable, and it's reaching a point where Castiel feels himself genuinely unable to concentrate and his decision-making skills severely impaired. Leading a company into an assault on a well-defended city such as Saint Lo seems frankly ludicrous when Castiel can hardly pull together the motor function required to open his canteen without his hands trembling at the thought of the way Sergeant Winchester might taste.

It's decided, then – the next time the company stops, Castiel is going to do the ridiculous.

After some hours of trudging quietly through near-identical fields of crops, the company pulls up to flank left, double back into the next field in case of being followed, and make a temporary harbour area in order to take on water and lunch. It's coming up to thirteen-hundred-hours and the heat of the day, so the soldiers are glad for a rest; they throw themselves down in the shades of whatever small trees they can find and sit down to set up their hexi-lighters for a coffee. Castiel doesn't excuse himself immediately. He makes his way through the company, checking with platoon leaders for injuries or issues with the soldiers; he checks ammunitions and supplies, and ensures that things are running smoothly, and only then – because if he's going to do this, he'll at least be professional about it – does he give himself the go-ahead.

Feeling hot and embarrassed, as though everyone must know exactly what Castiel is up to, he draws himself up tall and heads over to find Sergeant Milligan.

"First Sergeant?" Castiel calls.

Masters lifts his head from where he is crouched down looking at some injury that Private Zeddmore is showing him. "One sec sir!" he shouts back, and takes a moment to say a few more words to Zeddmore before he gets to his feet and comes jogging over.

“Everything alright?”

“All fine – I’m just going to head further back the way we came, check how distinct our trail is,” Castiel says. “You’re IC in my absence, but I shouldn’t be long.”

“Sure thing, sir.”

“Put one-platoon on first defense and rotate through so that everyone gets a good break. We’ll move out in—” Castiel checks his watch, “—forty minutes. Any questions?”

“No, sir.”

Castiel nods gratefully at Masters. “Dismissed.”

With his compass out and his rifle pulled into the crook of his elbow so that it at least looks like he’s going to do something useful, Castiel strides off out of the harbour area and heads down an uneven gravel path that runs alongside the rapeseed field in which they are camped. The path cuts along one edge of the field, and veers away through another, in direction of the main road, which Bravo Company are diligently trying to avoid, and so Castiel instead steps off the path and decides to pick his way into a small thicket of young trees.

Castiel is completely aware that this is one of the strangest and most vaguely inappropriate things he has ever done, but he doesn’t care anymore. He glances quickly back over his shoulder to check that no-one has followed him – a curious private, perhaps, or an NCO with an enquiry – and once he is sure he’s got the all-clear, he takes a couple of steps deeper into the thicket, and takes his rifle sling from his shoulder. He props his rifle carefully against the trunk of a tree, takes a deep breath as though plunging into water, lowers his hand to press

against his cock through his combat pants.

The first touch snags a gasp in the back of his throat – that's how bad it is, by now, that even the flat of his palm through two layers of fabric feels monumental – and for a second he has to stop, hold himself still, breathe. Then he's moving again, pressing down hard, snatching ragged breaths, and it's not enough. He tips his head forwards with a shallow noise, fumbles distractedly with the button of his pants, the zipper.

Skin on skin is better; it quickens his breathing and builds the heat in the pit of his stomach to something scorching that pulses for attention. He's close enough, already, that he doesn't need to think about anything to get him over the edge, but the thought comes unbidden: Sergeant Dean Winchester. Long legs, solid chest and shoulders, hands wide and sturdy to press finger-shaped bruises into Castiel's hipbones, hold him still – because his hips are starting to shift, and he rocks into his own touch, half-dizzy with the illusion of Dean's hands, Dean's mouth, the way he would look up at Castiel from under those ridiculous copper-coloured eyelashes when he's on his knees in the dirt.

Castiel squeezes his eyes closed, tries to concentrate on the heat and the pink stretch of Dean's mouth around his cock, and he isn't thinking about the low noises he's making as he struggles to keep his knees from wobbling underneath him. He's just moving as fast as he can, rolling with the burn of lust itching under his skin, and his mouth falls open with a soft whine, his head falls back in the last few seconds – he's close, in his daydream with Dean and the dirt on his face and the hungry eagerness in his eyes, he's so close – there is a narrowing pulse, a white-hot flush, and Castiel has to bite down on his lower lip – and there is a rustle in the bushes behind him.

Castiel gasps, "Fuck."

Somewhere between the image of Dean and the instant of Castiel

coming, hard, all over his hand, too late to pull back, he is flooded with sudden panic, because here are the Germans, and here he is in the bushes, with his rifle out of arms' reach, and he is busy touching himself. As he wipes the worst of the mess on a nearby tree-trunk and fumbles desperately with his zipper, he imagines it – being found dead by his superiors with an erection the size of the Eiffel Tower in his hands, and they will have to inform his next-of-kin, if they can find any, that *sir/madam, it is my regret to inform you that your relative was killed in combat while masturbating.*

"Lieutenant Novak?"

Castiel jumps half out of his skin, and he only barely has time to drag in deep breaths to cool himself down, snap his belt back into place and pull his combat jacket further down in an attempt to hide his crotch, before Private Bradbury has appeared on the other side of the thicket.

For a second they just look at each other – Bradbury wide-eyed and a little bewildered, Castiel breathing heavily and snatching his rifle up from where it leans against a tree.

Castiel balls one hand up tightly into a fist at his side. "What do you want?" he demands, and glares at him in the hopes that his wrath might overpower the humiliated red flush that he can feel creeping up over his jaw and ears.

"Sorry, sir, I was sent to find you," Bradbury explains, a blush gradually making its way up across his face as well, and Castiel has the terrifying sense that Bradbury knows exactly what he was doing a moment ago. Bradbury hesitates. "Uh, are you alright?"

"Perfectly fine, thank you," Castiel replies in clipped tones. "How can I help you?"

Bradbury lifts his chin up in the closest approximation he can get to a salute without actually doing it. “Captain Isaacs has come over from Able Company, sir. I think he wants to talk to you about Saint Lo.”

Castiel lets out a long breath. So much for a quiet moment in which to relieve himself, then. “Yes, private,” Castiel says, making an effort not to let his annoyance seep into his tone. “I’ll be there immediately. Thank you. You’re dismissed.”

“Yes, sir.” Private Bradbury gives a quick nod, and turns to walk back to the rest of the company. In quiet exasperation, Castiel watches him go, and as he cleans up his hand and slings his assault rifle back onto his shoulder to trek back, he wonders privately if the entirety of the United States Army is conspiring against him.

5th July, 1944

It’s oh-one-hundred hours, somewhere between Sainte Marguerite d’Elle and Cerisy-la-Forêt , and Castiel is out walking.

He never originally intended to find himself wandering through the woods and the darkness in the dead of the night – he more wound up here by accident. First there were sentry rotas to check, and messages to run between Baker and the other companies of the 116th; then he had to radio into Battalion staff to inform them of their location and their next anticipated movement, as well to see what he could glean of nearby Kraut movement; then there were reports to write up and supply lists to check before handing back to his administration officer, and there were letters to write to next-of-kin regarding soldier casualties, and Castiel is quickly learning that there is no comfortable

way to phrase ‘limb loss’ so that it doesn’t sound devastating. The long and short of it is that Castiel has not been back to his bivouac for over six hours, much less snatched any sleep.

His single consolation is that at least it isn’t cold; at least it isn’t raining; at least it is, for once, quiet, without the rattle and scream of nearby artillery bombardments or gunfire. He doesn’t miss it, and so he is on some level glad to be out, and awake, and walking, if only to appreciate the temporary hush of humanity around him.

While he’s out, he decides to do one last check of the harbour area perimeter – ensuring that the sentry points are well-equipped and that the men on duty are doing alright, as well checking that the line doesn’t break at any point between sentry positions – and as he moves out from one corner of their temporary harbour, he runs into a four-man patrol from Lieutenant Alistair’s artillery platoon as they move out towards the eastern cornfields.

“Evening, Sergeant Campbell,” he says to the squad leader, keeping his voice low, as they pass, and for a time he walks with them. According to Campbell, there are some artillery ammunition shortages in the platoon – nothing Castiel didn’t already know, and unfortunately there is nothing he can do to dissuade Campbell’s concern except to assure him that he has spoken to Battalion staff about it – although Campbell goes on to say that morale seems to be high, and they haven’t had any injury more severe than a blister since Private Gardner stepped on a grenade outside St. Clair-sur-L’Elle. For the most part, it sounds as though life in four-platoon is running smoothly, and Castiel does feel somewhat comforted by the knowledge.

From Castiel’s left and slightly ahead of him, there comes the slow crunch of footsteps through the undergrowth, followed by the occasional shift of a silhouette through the trees.

Castiel drops down to one knee and lifts a clenched fist to signal to the

squad behind him to do the same. He waits another few seconds to allow the movement to trudge gradually closer, and then he calls softly, “Thunder.”

“Aw, crap.”

Castiel rolls his eyes, and glances across at Sergeant Campbell, who he sees has dropped his head into his hands. Castiel knows how he feels. He, too, can recognise the dulcet tones of Private Frampton from afar.

“Flash!” someone else in the other squad quickly speaks up, followed by, “Christ’s sake, Framp, what’s the goddamn point in having a password if you just—”

“Easy, sergeant,” a third soldier speaks up, almost bored, and Castiel can recognise Inias’ exasperated voice. “Come on, everybody – drills and skills.”

“You’re lucky we didn’t shoot you all,” Castiel speaks up, getting to his feet.

“Well, I’ll be damned. Lieutenant Novak.” The silhouette that Castiel can faintly recognise as being the shape of Inias walks over.

“Wallace.”

As four-platoon’s patrol squad get up and continue on their way, falling again into silence after a couple whispered exclamations of *good going, Frampton* and *next time we’ll shoot first,* Castiel heads across to Inias’ squad and falls into step with him as they move off on their separate route. The two of them wander slightly further from the

squad, out of earshot.

“Evening,” Inias says. “Sorry about Frampton.”

“Inias, you don’t have to be sorry to me. You’ll be sorry if he gets you all killed,” Castiel says bluntly. He has found in recent weeks that he has even less patience for sugar-coating things; he doesn’t have time, and he can’t spare the concentration from his day to consider other people’s feelings. He has a lot to be dealing with aside from thinking about making sure his taciturn words don’t upset the men.

Inias lets out a long breath, sounding a little defeated. “Yeah, I know. We’re trying to work on it. Campbell put him scout with the theory that practice makes perfect, but…” He shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t know. He’s a good kid – but he’s just that. He’s just a kid.”

Castiel squints up at the sky, the thin white strip of a new moon occasionally glinting from behind cloud cover to illuminate the woods. “We were kids, not so long ago.”

“Christ, do you have to say shit like that? You make me feel old,” Inias groans.

“How old is he?”

“What, Frampton? Nineteen, on his documents. By the look of him, by his attitude?” Inias shakes his head. “No idea. God knows why anyone would want to sneak into the frigging army, but there you go.”

Castiel presses his lips together. “He’ll learn.”

“I fucking hope so.”

They walk in silence for a while, both tuned into the sound of their men’s footsteps through the trees, their gazes turned out to patrol. The night is quiet, unusually balmy in spite of the heavy skies, and things seem for the most part peaceful. The idea that the Germans are waiting out there somewhere, under this same sky and in the same cool night air, and Castiel finds himself wishing, not for the first time, that the war could just stop, even for a day. He’d like to see Europe; he’d like to eat the food and learn the languages and see the sights, without worrying about the lives of a hundred other men. It has already reached a point where his regard for his own life is negligible – for the most part, he is only concerned in self-preservation in order to go on leading and protecting Baker Company. Anything more than that is currently beyond his mental or emotional grasp.

“What are you doing out here, anyway?” Inias asks after a few minutes’ walking. “You’re not meant to patrol, remember?”

“I’m not technically patrolling,” Castiel tells him, and lifts his empty hands to indicate that he is not holding his rifle; it remains slung over his shoulder, clanking gently against his webbing. “I was just walking. Checking the harbour area perimeter, I suppose. I caught one-platoon patrol squad coming out past their sentry and I just walked with them for a while. Now I’m walking with you.”

“Fair enough.”

“Anyway, where are you going?” Castiel asks.

“In the long run? Germany, hopefully.”

Castiel throws him a hard look.

"Ohh, you mean *now*." Inias chuckles to himself, evidently still convinced he's the funniest man alive. "We're going over south towards the main supply route to see what we can see – a little birdie in C-Coy told me they've got some beautiful tall church spires in Pont-Hebert."

Castiel grimaces. "I do love a beautiful tall church spire."

"You and me both," Inias says cheerfully. "After all, they say there's no faster way to get sent back home."

"In a body bag, perhaps."

Inias gives a short, hard laugh. "I'm not picky."

Castiel hits him in the arm with the butt of his rifle. "Don't say that," he tells him.

With his own rifle carefully balanced in the crooks of his two elbows, Inias holds his hands up to surrender. "Look, babe, I've been out here for hours. It's dark. It's raining. I've got a shit the size of Texas backed all the way up to my eyeballs. And I was on first sentry this morning."

With a huff in the back of his throat, Castiel just says, "Inias."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I can hardly complain to you of all people," Inias says. He looks over at Castiel with a grim expression. "How long have

you even been out here?"

Castiel shakes back the sleeve of his combat jacket to check his watch. "Since… twenty-two-hundred."

"Yikes."

"It's not too bad. It's a nice night."

Inias snorts derisively. "For you, maybe. It ain't exactly Hawaii out here." Castiel decides not to remind Inias that he has never actually been to Hawaii, in which case how would he know? Inias goes on, "I am just counting the minutes until I can get back in my soft, comfortable shell scraping."

Castiel smiles, exhaling a small laugh.

"Don't you laugh at me," Inias says, and even through the dark, Castiel can see him lift a defensive finger to point at him. "That patch of dirt is home sweet home tonight."

"I'm not laughing at you."

"Good. Hey, you know there's a rumour going around about you, right?" Inias says conversationally. "Not as good as the stories that go around every damn day about Fort Blanding, but…"

Castiel has a bad feeling about this. "What rumours?"

“They’re saying that Spangler caught you beating off in the wilderness.”

Castiel lets out a long sigh. Of course that story is spreading through the company like wildfire; he doesn’t know why he expected anything different. Within a week it’ll probably be making its way up the ranks to battalion headquarters, and then he’ll be in somewhat more serious trouble. All in all, it’s shaping up to be a great day. “That’s not true,” he says.

Inias shoots him a quizzical glance. “Well, yeah, I didn’t actually think you had.”

“It was Bradbury.”

“What?” Inias looks over at him in open horror. “Seriously?”

Castiel doesn’t answer that.

“For Christ’s sake, Cas – what the hell is wrong with you?”

“I do have a shrapnel wound, which hurts—”

Inias huffs. “Don’t be funny, it doesn’t suit you. Seriously.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” Castiel mutters, with a furtive glance backwards over his shoulder at where Inias’ patrol

squad is slowly marching along. “I didn’t exactly intend to be discovered. Will you keep it down?”

Inias looks decidedly unimpressed, but he does at least lower his voice. “Why the hell were you even beating off in the wilderness anyway?”

“Would you rather I did it in the goddamn harbour area?” Castiel hisses.

Inias raises his eyebrows. “Everybody else does! Like, in your sleeping bag, or on sentry duty or something, I don’t know.”

“Well, I’m not everyone else.”

All the tension and incredulity leaves Inias’ shoulders, and his mouth falls slightly open. He falls out of step for a second, and for several paces afterwards has to hurry to catch up and get back in rhythm. “Oh my god. This is about Winchester, isn’t it?”

“No,” Castiel says – perhaps too quickly.

Inias doesn’t look at him for several seconds. Then he puffs his breath out into his cheeks and gives a helpless sort of shrug. “Well, I guess at least you’re getting it out of your system?” he says, but his voice lifts up at the end, as though he’s asking a question, and he looks over at Castiel. Although Castiel cannot see his face distinctly through the dark, he knows that Inias is looking at him with inquisitive eyes, and he knows that he is looking for Castiel to agree. He wants Castiel to come back with some deadpan joke and tell him that he is getting it out of his system.

Castiel doesn't say anything.

He wants to tell Inias everything. He wants to tell him that the problem is not getting better, it's getting worse – because as time goes on, Castiel is actually getting to know Dean, and the Dean that Castiel is uncovering is smart and quiet and soft. Castiel wants to tell him about the way Dean looks when he is nervous, and when he is trying to pretend he is not scared, and when he misses his mother even after decades. He wants to tell him about the way Dean smiles. He wants to tell him that three times now he has thought about kissing Dean for comfort. Kissing him without desire, without the thought of his hands and his body and the noises he would make when he was close to completion, but just because Dean's mouth looks sweet and careful. Sometimes Castiel wants to touch him innocently - the hinge of his jaw, his wrist-bones, the bridge of his nose – and Castiel wants to tell Inias all of this, and more, but he can't.

Inias doesn't mind Castiel being queer, but he has limits. Being Castiel's best friend doesn't mean that he wants to know the gruesome details of the way Castiel's heart quickens when Dean laughs. Wanting to fuck a boy is easy; wanting to kiss a boy is different.

Chapter 6: Saint Lo

9th July, 1944

Dear Sam,

What about Novak? No, yeah, he's fine. Whatever. I dunno why you keep pestering me about it. So what if I haven't mentioned him recently – yeah, he's alive, and he's still a pain in the ass, mostly. As far as commanding officers go, I guess. Like I said, whatever. What do you care, Sammy? You got nothing else better to think about – you getting bored of Jessica or something, want to switch? You're welcome to him.

So, we're almost at our next big assault now – and when I say big, I mean it. I think this is probably the biggest thing we've done since the landing? I can't say too much, you know, in case someone else gets this letter (hands off, German assholes. This isn't for you! Put it down, danke schun) but I'll just say that's it gonna be like I Capture The Castle at the Carmichael house the Christmas after you turned fourteen, only we're the Carmichaels. Yeah. You get what I mean. I'll tell you more about it once we get through… We've more or less had an easy passage from Grandcamp, only run into a couple German platoons on our way, and I kind of feel like my luck's gonna run out soon. I get the feeling that shit is gonna get real complicated and I'm gonna have my work cut out for me. Fingers crossed everything goes smoothly.

Fingers crossed things work out okay for you, too! Jeez. I told you that you'd be sick and tired of dad soon enough, didn't I? But seriously, if you want me to write to him and get him to back off, or argue your point or whatever, just let me know. I'll do it. I know you think I don't stand up to him for anything, but I will for you. Someone's gotta have your back, and while I don't doubt Jessica can hold her own, I don't know if she's ready to take on John Winchester. Maybe wait a little longer – when it's less close to mom's anniversary and he's less sort of… volatile, I figure. You'll get there, don't worry. Anyway, you doing anything this weekend? Let me know. There's not a lot going on here in terms of gossip or drama to keep the mind occupied… Joe Harvelle and Pat Barnes got in an argument a couple days ago, almost escalated to a punch-up if Lieutenant Wallace hadn't

intervened, but it was just over some French girl… Nothing serious. Give me something to tell the guys – even if it's just the score of the Kansas City Royals.

I'll write again when I can. Try not to piss dad off any more than you have to – and look after yourself. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

11th July, 1944

The issue with Saint Lo, Castiel soon discovers, is that it is well guarded. Not necessarily by men – although there is that, as well – but the town is built on a series of hills and high rock bluffs, with the older part of the town on advantageously high ground. Moreover, the outskirts of the town are cut up into fields divided by sunken roads, antipersonnel mines, and hedgerows. These are not like the hedgerows of Bedford, Virginia, which are primarily decorative, rather than functional; these are tall enough that the average man cannot see over the top, deliberately cut back over many years so as to thicken the branches at the base to the point that the hedges are physically impenetrable, some several feet deep and often built up from low earthen walls.

Over the last few miles' approach, Castiel has been called into more meetings and discussions that ever before – with the other company commanding officers of 116th, and then with battalion staff as they organise with the rest of the regiment, and then, just once, with regimental superiors coordinating the entire 29th Infantry Division, alongside several other divisions from the V Corps. As far as Castiel understands it, the 116th are a monumentally important force in the effort to take the city – pushing down south from the front of La

Meauffe and Villiers-Fossard to take the Vire river and the Bérigny highway.

As Castiel heads up through the men where they are waiting in the final rendezvous point in search of the other company COs, he is aware of the faint buzz of nerves all through the soldiers. Saint Lo will be the largest assault that Castiel has been a part of – as an official commanding officer, that is. Project Neptune was larger, but to say that he was a well-organised CO at that moment would be a severe overstatement, considering that he only received the position as he reached Omaha beach and had to improvise a great deal of his movements as he went along.

For the rest of the company, this will be the first time since D-Day when they have been an important part of a coordinated attack – and the first time where they are aware prior to the beginning of the assault just how much that will require of them. Before Omaha, there was laughter; there were light-hearted jokes on the LCVP. Now, the men are quiet. They smoke cigarettes and eat their chocolate D-rations. They check their weapons.

Castiel comes to a halt in front of where the other COs are stood – talking, smoking, peering away through the thin light of the morning at where the brick roofs of Saint Lo can be distantly seen. Captain Gabriel Laufeyson is the first to notice him.

“Hey, Novak.” He raises a hand in a half-wave. “How are you, this fine summer morning?”

“Too hot already,” Castiel says. Even in the early hours of the morning, the sun is climbing and casting shimmery pale waves of heat across the earth, the dirt roads slowly baking and the grass curling, crisp and parched, in their thirst. It’s not a good day for an assault.

Gabriel gives a short laugh, and then digs in the pocket of his combat jacket to offer him a cigarette. Castiel gratefully accepts; he gets the feeling that he'll be running low in the days to come.

"Do we have word from Major Singer yet?" asks the CO of Charlie Company, a relatively new face who Castiel guesses must be in a similar position to him – one fresh-faced young Lieutenant Naomi, a slight, well-presented man who seems to spend most of his time concerned about uniform appearances.

"Oh-five-hundred-hours," Major Isaacs says, verbose as ever. He glances at his watch. "Five minutes. Let's get them formed up."

Cigarette clenched between his lips, Castiel breathes deep.

They move out. Three divisions are spread out other about twenty miles on two sides of Saint Lo, and once they have the radio signal that the 115th and 175th Regiments are both in position, it's time to go. The 116th move in order of Company, which puts Baker just behind Major Isaacs, and they head south.

At oh-six-hundred, the sound of the preparatory artillery shelling on the Germans position to clear way for the 38th Infantry Division on their way to Hill 192, the other side of Saint Lo. At oh-six-twenty comes word that the 35th and 38th are on the move, and at oh-seven-hundred, the Germans start to hit back hard.

The first couple shellings aren't too bad – just the hollow sound of the guns, the scream of metal overhead, the crash as it lands, shakes the earth up into shards, and splinters trees like match-sticks – while the Germans try to work out more accurately where to put down their fire in order to tear Baker and the rest of the 116th to pieces, but they get closer. And closer, and closer still, until it's all around them – until Castiel is curled into the dirt with a half-heard yell dying in his throat,

some wretched animal noise akin to *take cover*. He drags himself up, then, with the dust swirling thick around them, stinging harsh into the corners of his eyes, and he's screaming to go, go, go, get up and fucking move.

It's nothing unusual. It's not to say that Castiel will ever get used to it, but by now he's familiar with the racing heart and throat-choking fear of it; he's used to shouting commands that he barely understands, to forcing himself to see his men and friends as chess-pieces so that he doesn't shatter if they take a round through the throat. He's used to running fast and thinking fast, his brain a mile-a-minute as he tries to figure what the hell he's meant to do.

They push up through two hedgerows before they encounter a serious problem – since the hedges are impenetrable, they can only get through where spaces have been cut through for the express purpose, and of course, the Germans have their eye on all those spaces at all times. They discover this the hard way when they send one-platoon through – with Private Rourke on scout, who has only just recovered from a piece of shrapnel to the face when recovering the Vierville draw. They radio for battalion aid staff to come up from the rear to take the body back. Lyle Rourke is the first loss of the day, but he is not the last.

They lose Sergeant Christian Campbell to a direct mortar hit just before lunch; Private Reznik loses an arm to a chunk of shrapnel – Private Scott takes his helmet off for a few minutes to cool his head, hot as the morning is, and takes a bullet just above his left eyebrow. It's a busy day for Dean and T-4 Sergeant Teddy du Mort.

Castiel sends in mortar after mortar and calls in heavier artillery support from the rear, but the simple fact is that he doesn't have the coordinates for any enemy positions in order to put down accurate suppressive fire, and it seems there is no way to find out the coordinates without getting killed.

He sits in a shallow ditch just along the side of one hedgerow, some ten feet away from the opening, and glances along at the dust and rubble of the pathway where, for the moment at least, mortars have finally stopped falling. “Where’s Private Gallagher?”

Gallagher runs up, half-skidding in the dirt as he comes up to Castiel, and near-enough flings himself down against the ground to get in close to cover – accidentally whacking himself in the back of the head with his radio equipment in the process. “Here, sir!”

“Radio in to Able, see if they’re having any luck with hedge set-up.” Castiel turns the other way to face Sergeant Milligan. “Get Lieutenant Hester in here with three-platoon. I want you to put smoke down on the other side of the entrance, mortars down just over the hedge, and use the cover to get through and spread out. Don’t bother with putting down any rounds, just get through and get into cover. Take Barnes, Doe, Bradbury, Chambers, and Richards. Get another squad prepared and ready to move in after you.”

Milligan takes a deep, steadying breath, but he nods. “Yes, sir.”

The sun inches slowly higher into the sky, its light thick, yellow, and hazy.

With the help of heavy artillery from the back of the line, there is, thankfully, enough room amongst the chaos and rubble for Baker and the rest of the companies of the 116th, led by Major Isaacs of Able, to slip their column down south towards the Martinville ridge, albeit in slow measures.

They push in, and they fall back, and they throw all their weight at the Germans – light artillery, heavy artillery back-up from the battalion some miles behind, the aggressive rattle of rifles and machine-guns like a snap of sharp teeth – and nothing gives. There is

the endless roar of planes overhead, whistling like a high wind, and then Saint Lo ahead of them is lit up with fireworks, shaking to collapse with buildings coming down; there is the hungry chug of tanks along with Dog Company, and along to the south with the 175th , and thick clouds of hot dust are thrown up to choke Castiel's men. Still, with all this and all the brimstone and fire raining down from the infantry, the Germans do not seem to so much as flinch.

There is word from the rear of the 115th being over-run at the other side of the front, of heavy casualties and a counter-attack, but Castiel scarcely has time to process what that means. They're close enough to their clearing their first major obstacle - he can see where the ground rises before it drops back down to the sunken road that leads back to Isigny, and for the first time in hours, the fall of mortars has eased up enough that they can sprint for it.

"Two platoon over first!" Castiel yells into the smoke, hoarse and almost overshadowed by the deafening rattle of gunfire from the German strongholds to the south. "In fire-teams, one by one – and wait for proven route! Private Pond, get Hester on the line, I want three-platoon over next. One-platoon, sustain suppressive fire."

The men are thundering past, then, and Castiel ducks away to let them past, and he doesn't know what he's shouting at them except for blind words of encouragement, and then the sound of his voice is lost as the world is lit up as with fireworks.

Everything is silent. There is just the force of the mine-blast through the earth – the first, and then the second – and the cloud of dirt and smoke churning up to sting at the backs of Castiel's eyes. In the near distance, there is a high scream; a belated chatter of gunfire as the men suppressing stall for a moment, unsure what to do; the ever-chilling cry of *medic, medic, left of axis*.

Castiel throws a hand over his eyes to shield them as he tries to work his burning, dust-coated mouth to form words: "Pull them back, pull

them – Wallace, Hester, pull them back. Get Azazel here with some bangers!"

Four-platoon is several hundred yards back, set up for artillery support, so it takes a few minutes for the men to run up with the Bangalore torpedoes necessary to clear a path through the minefield, and by that time, enough of the smoke has cleared for Castiel to see what he had hoped he wouldn't have to. Blood on Dean Winchester's hands.

Private Frampton is crying, swearing at the top of his lungs, clinging feebly to the tatters of his own uniform. He shouts out, and dark liquid spills from his mouth. There are other casualties, too, but they are indistinguishable. They are more dirt than flesh, now, and Castiel lets his gaze move over their incomplete mass without thinking too hard about it.

"Fire in the hole," yells Corporal Montgomery, and then again the sky explodes, the men cringing back, but this time it is deliberate, and Castiel sends two-platoon through again. He sees that Inias is white-faced, tight-knuckled, as he runs, but there's no time to talk.

Baker Company and the rest of the 116th cross the sunken road with minimal injury from the unseen minefield, which is progress, but as they tilt east towards Saint Lo on the Martinville ridge, they are caught off-guard by defilade from German positions south of the highway, and the shelling begins again. They fight back, move up, fill in their position and hold, but the enemy fire is unrelenting, and they are forced back from the Bayeux highway.

As the day wears on and evening draws into a dusky pale twilight, it becomes apparent that Baker Company are not going to get any closer to Saint Lo – not with the ways that they're currently trying to break through, and not with the men exhausted after a long, hot, and dusty day of brutal fighting.

Reluctantly, Castiel gives the command to pull back. They withdraw a little further back from the ridge so that they can't be seen by whatever enemy positions lurk just out of sight, and they dig in. He takes the platoon commanders to issue instructions to start working on shell-scrapings for the night, and set up sentries on three sides of their positions – a linear harbour area, holding the line.

"I want at least two squads holding the line at all times during the night," Castiel tells them. "If we let them take it back, we'll lose what little progress we've made today. I want two patrol squads put together to try and get through, gauge their defences – setting out at oh-one-hundred and oh-three-hundred respectively. Reveille is oh-five-hundred, so make sure your men know to get as much rest as possible."

He glances around them; they all look bone-tired, and Castiel feels a faint twinge of regret that he has to work them so hard.

"Make sure you're well-rested as well," he goes on. "I don't want any of you on sentry, or on the patrol squads – put Sergeant Brady and Corporal Lafitte in charge of those. Send Staff Masters around to check on everyone's supplies, and someone get Winchester and du Mort to me ASAP for casualty reports. Anything further?"

The platoon leaders look around at each other, but aside from Sergeant Milligan struggling to stifle a yawn, no-one has anything to add.

"Alright, then – get to it. You're dismissed." Castiel nods as they turn away, and finds himself stifling a yawn of his own. It's been a goddamn long day. However, as he opens his eyes, he finds Inias still standing there, waiting for him. "What's going on?"

Inias shrugs. “Nothing – I just thought I’d see if you were okay.”

“I’m fine.”

“Cas, you look like shit.”

“I said, I’m fine.”

“Seriously. You want me to get someone to bring you anything?” Inias’ voice is low, concerned, and he takes a tentative step closer, raising a hand to rest on Castiel’s arm. “Some food, or at least some coffee?”

“I don’t have time, Inias,” Castiel snaps, shrugging away Inias’ hand, and in the back of his mind he registers Inias flinching at the outburst, but he doesn’t even allow himself time to feel guilty about yelling at his best friend. “It’s nine o’clock. I have three different reports to write up, I have to talk to the other Company COs, I have to figure what the hell we’re going to do tomorrow, and I have to report back to Major Singer to tell him the full details of all aforementioned – by midnight. I do not have time coffee and chit-chat.”

Castiel looks away, then; he doesn’t want to see the hurt on Inias’ face. He doesn’t have time for it. As it turns out, however, he doesn’t need to. When Inias responds, his voice is calm and collected, like he isn’t even fazed by Castiel’s little tantrum.

“Let me know if you need anything,” he says, and although Castiel is tempted to continue being a little shit and demand whether there isn’t anything more important that he should be doing, he doesn’t get the opportunity, because before he can speak, Inias has left in search of his platoon.

Once Castiel is sure that Inias is some yards away, he looks up to watch him leave. He considers Inias, sometimes, as two halves – one of which is his friend since school, and the other of which is a lieutenant with natural leadership skills, an excellent sense of camaraderie with the men, and a complete lack of interest in personal dramatics. Bitterly, Castiel wonders why Inias couldn't have been made Baker Company CO – but there's no point dwelling on that now.

Battalion executive staff bring up support from the rear – mail for the soldiers from back home, and best of all, A-rations. It's been weeks since any of them have had proper hot food

"Damn, I should get myself shot more often," Private Tran says cheerily as he shovels a forkful of steaming potatoes into his mouth – as best he can, since he's currently twisted sideways with his shirt rucked up under his armpits to let Dean treat a shallow but nasty wound where a bullet grazed his ribs.

"Come off it, you barely got shot," Bradbury scoffs, but there's a smile to his look and he reaches across to offer Tran some of his coffee.

"Okay, the food's great, but let me ask you this: is anybody else here obscenely horny?" Gallagher asks, to the displeased groans of all the soldiers around him, who are very vocal about the fact that this announcement is more information than they needed. "Like, come on. At this stage, I think I'd fuck a Kraut."

Corporal Mills gives a short laugh. "You'd fuck anything that sits still long enough."

"Hey, if she's willing, I'm able!"

“No, you’re Baker,” Pat Barnes tells him, and is met with a mixture of resounding cheers and groans of *please don’t sergeant, not the military puns.*

“I don’t know why you’re telling me this, Gallagher, I’m not sure not gonna help you out there,” Milligan says from the middle of the formation.

“Actually, forget sex,” Gallagher declares dramatically. “I take it all back. Right now I would just kill to take a goddamn dump in peace—”

“Hear, hear.”

“—without worrying that I’m gonna get shot in the ass by Herr goddamn Kraut. One good, solid dump, that’s all I ask!”

“Liquid,” Private Fitzgerald chimes in.

Gallagher cackles with maniacal laughter.

“For Christ’s sake—”

“You’re fuckin’ disgusting, you know that—?”

“Keep it down,” Castiel tells them irritably, raising his voice over the myriad complaints being directed at Fitzgerald. “They’ve stopped shelling us for the first time all day, so I’ll thank you to lower the volume before they figure out where we’re sleeping.”

From the back, someone grumbles something about a killjoy, which Castiel deigns to ignore. He has more important things to worry about that whether his men think he's an asshole.

He walks down the length of the hedgerow and then back, away from what could be considered the front-line, and finds a small, rubble-filled crater in the ground where a shell must have hit earlier today. He kicks out the worst of the mess, twisted metal and great clods of soil, and settles down inside it, being too tired and preoccupied to make an actual shell-scraping for the night. Technically speaking, he does have a tent at the bottom of his haversack – commanding officers' luxury – but he's fairly certain that it's never even been out of its packaging. He doesn't mean to keep sleeping in the dirt like an enlisted man; it just keeps happening, because he's exhausted and he doesn't have the time to set it up.

At the bottom of his crater, Castiel pulls out his maps and notebook to work through recent manoeuvres and what would be the best approach for tomorrow, with a small flashlight between his teeth and a pencil in hand. Within twenty minutes, the flashlight has been replaced with a cigarette, the pencil used mostly for hitting himself in the forehead to try and encourage productive brain activity. It doesn't help.

Castiel loses track of time – he knows it's not twenty-one-thirty yet, which is when he's due to meet the other COs, so that's all that matters – but slowly the sky grows dark and his flashlight becomes more essential, and his cigarette burns his lower lip as it smoulders down to a stub, and then falls to burn dimly in the loose dirt.

After some minutes, footsteps come creaking up over the cracked dirt to stand in front of Castiel, and then there is a low wolf-whistle – and Castiel has been struggling over the same problem for half an hour, and he is all out of patience, and he snaps. "I'm serious, Inias, I—" When he looks up to glare at him, however, he finds Dean standing in front of him, and the words die in Castiel's mouth. "Oh. It's you." He

lets out a rough breath. “Sorry. Do you have the casualty reports?”

Dean holds them out in one hand; in his other he holds a tin mug, from which a thin spiral of steam rises.

“Here, please,” Castiel says, and gestures to a patch of the ground beside him, and then immediately redirects his attention to his maps. Dean obediently bends to set the papers down where indicated, and then straightens up again to wait. “Thank you,” Castiel says distractedly, hardly noticing.

Dean looks down at the mug in his hands and after a moment, he holds it out to Castiel. “You want some coffee, sir?”

Castiel scans the length of the Saint Lo-Bayeux road as indicated on his map, looking at its route past the Martinville ridge. “Hmm?”

“Coffee.”

Castiel looks up at him. “What?” At last he takes in the mug that Dean is offering, and wearily he realises what is happening. He sighs. “Lieutenant Wallace told you to give that me, didn’t he?”

“No!” Dean splutters indignantly. “What? No way. Absolutely not. No.”

“And he told you to deny it if I asked you.”

Dean hesitates, with the start of a smile on his face. “He… might have

done that."

Goddamnit. Sometimes Castiel resents that Inias knows him so well. The jackass knew that Castiel would have a harder time turning it down if it came from Dean – because Dean is cute, loath as Castiel is to admit it, and he's funny sometimes, and as a medic, he's fairly insistent when it comes to looking after people. For some reason, it is because of all this that Castiel feels a stubborn urge to be deliberately difficult come over him; he doesn't need looking after. "I'm not thirsty," he says dismissively, and returns his gaze to his maps.

"I don't think he asked me to bring it to you on account of you being parched, sir."

"That's good, then, because I don't want it," Castiel mutters.

"Sir?"

Castiel looks at him hard, eyes narrowed, and he just dares Dean to say another word about it, because he honestly does not have a modicum of patience left to spare on humouring Dean Winchester when he thinks he's being cute.

Dean peers into the mug. "Uh. Can I have it, then?"

Some of Castiel's anger seems to deflate inside his chest, but it doesn't make him feel better. It just makes him feel slightly empty. Defeated, he nods. He goes to pull on his cigarette, and his fingers get to his mouth before he realises that it's gone.

"You want a light, sir?" Dean asks.

Yes. Castiel does. He can't speak to indicate as much, however; he feels abruptly that all his strength and energy has left him, and he just sits in his shell crater, hunched over his maps, with a dull throb of pain in his injured shoulder and a heaviness that threatens to crush him.

Without Castiel saying another word, Dean sets down his mug of coffee beside his foot, and then crouches. He fishes a crumpled box of cigarettes from his pocket, pulls two out, and holds them both in his mouth as he flicks his lighter's flame to them.

He drags in a deep breath, letting them catch, and then he tilts his head away from Castiel to exhale smoke, before he passes one of them over. "Excuse me," he says politely, with a nod in the direction of his grubby fingers on the cigarette and the touch of his mouth on the end, and for all his brash, loudmouth arrogance and dirty humour, Castiel is once again taken by surprise by Dean's gentleness, his good manners.

Castiel takes the cigarette from him. Their fingers touch, side by side on the crinkled paper.

As Castiel takes a long pull, Dean tucks his own cigarette between two fingers and retrieves his coffee from the floor. He stands up. "You need anything else?" he asks.

Numbly, Castiel shakes his head. He doesn't trust himself to speak, or even to look at Dean, for fear of the truth spilling out, of how much he feels he needs him to stay, and so Castiel just focuses on his maps and the task at hand.

Dean stands in front of him a second longer, just watching him. Then,

as he turns to go, in a voice so quiet that Castiel could have missed it entirely if he had not being paying attention, Dean says, “You’re doing a good job, sweetheart. Don’t let it get to you.”

Castiel doesn’t answer. He stares down at his papers and lets Dean walk away to leave him alone. He has a lot to do.

12th July, 1944

One day during the never-ending crawl to Saint Lo, when Baker exhaust themselves in their attempts to destroy, infiltrate, or circumnavigate the hedgerows defending the highway, Castiel calls for a break. He gives the order to pull back, set up a temporary harbour area, and dig in for food and smokes until Charlie Company comes around with word from Major Campbell about any helpful heavy artillery movement. For the circumstances, it’s fairly quiet, with the exception of Sergeant Barnes’ hacking cough, and the incessant humming of Corporal Lafitte, who has had the same three bars of Shoo Shoo Baby stuck in his head for the past week, and so Castiel feels secure enough in their location to take a moment for himself. He unclips the front strap of his haversack, which leaves it loose on his shoulders, and drops down heavily into the dirt. He loosens the strap of his helmet, but as he reaches up to flatten a hand over the crown of his helmet and tilt it back on his head, there is a crack and a yell and a long moment of silence and then a grenade lands between Castiel’s legs.

There isn’t even enough time for a warning. Someone drags in a gasp as though to cry out, but otherwise the moment is perfectly frozen, and Castiel finds himself just looking at this grenade, half-buried in the soil between his knees, with a kind of dejected resignation, as though to say, *oh dear. This is unfortunate.*

There is the click.

Nothing happens.

It seems the grenade is a dud. Castiel looks up at the rest of his platoon, all of whom are staring at him with mixed expressions of horror.

Without a word, Castiel fishes in his pocket for a cigarette, wedges it between his lips, and distractedly lights it, with the distinct thought that it's going to be a very long day.

13th July, 1944

Castiel crouches in the grass, half-hidden behind a swell in the turf where the ground slopes up to meet the Bayeux highway, and he pulls the map out of his combat jacket pocket to show to his platoon leaders.

"Alright, can everyone see? We're currently here. We know there are at least two light artillery positions within these buildings – one in the graveyard just behind that field, one somewhere on the east side of the buildings, between the highway and our position. Alistair, I want our artillery divided – half the force back here, at least as far back as that abandoned barn we passed, and I want you ready to fire on their positions once you have confirmed coordinates. I want the rest of your men placed around here, on the eastern side, to provide supporting mortar fire on any positions defending the highway."

Alistair gives a curt nod, his eyes flickering over the map as he takes in the positions indicated by Castiel's hand.

"Three-platoon will left flank," Castiel goes on, and he glances up at

Lieutenant Hester, who looks decidedly unhappy, “coming around through the northern fields, which should take you around to the back of the buildings – where it’s most likely their supplies will be located, so take extra firepower in terms of mortars – borrow a few artillerymen from four-platoon. The highway will be defended, so we can’t get an effective right flanking in, but if one-platoon takes this side road here, around those hills, you’ll be able to get around towards it without too much pressure from the main defense forces – so Virgil, you’ll need to radio in to four-platoon the coordinates for their artillery positions when found. Make that your priority.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And finally, Wallace, I want two-platoon going in down the main route of access – wait until you have word from one- and three-platoon that they’re assaulting their positions, and then their defensive should be focused either side of the main road, so your assault shouldn’t be too heavily met.” Castiel’s mouth twists. “In theory.”

“And if it is?” Inias asks, and he meets Castiel’s eyes.

“Take it building by building. Clear it out, as slow as you need to, and I’ll move four-platoon’s second squad up from the barn to a position where they can give you better cover – such as the marketplace, if they can get that close. We’ll play it by ear.”

Castiel is almost about to continue to explain where he will fit in, but then he remembers that he doesn’t fit in anywhere. He is not a part of this assault. He takes a deep breath and folds the map away into his pocket. “I’ll keep Private Pond with me, so ensure your comms are clear and close at hand at all times.”

“Yes, sir,” comes back to him; Inias, ever the optimist, gives him a bright smile.

Castiel lets them leave to their own companies and pass orders onto their platoon leaders in turn; then they move out.

The assault on Saint Lo is so far not going exactly as planned. The idea is that the 29th and 35th Infantry Divisions would hold the northern front from La Meauffe to Villiers-Fossard and then slowly push down towards the Vire river and the Bérigny fork in the highway, taking their strongholds on the hills north on the town, and then reach a point where they could surround the city and push the occupying Germans out. However, while the 38th and 23rd Divisions have managed to take the most important observational point in the Germans' defences, the attack has been a disaster so far from everyone else's perspectives.

Castiel's regiment are working with the 115th and 175th on the northwest side of town, one of whom were almost decimated in the first day in their position up north of the old city, and the other of whom are trapped behind the 116th, unable to push up due to the ferocity of the enemy shelling. It's not ideal. Moreover, the poor weather means a lack of air support today, which they had desperately needed. Castiel is painfully aware that a different section of the 29th Division had made an attempt to take the city before, and failed; he is beginning to see why.

As everyone surges ahead, Castiel heads back to keep a position where he can, for the most part, keep an eye on what's going on. Three-platoon jogging out of sight down the narrow hedgerow-lined lanes; four-platoon pulling back towards the open fields with good sights of the higher ground; two- and one-platoon waiting in the ditches. The air is already thick with smoke and light dust shaken up from the dry dirt as Thunderbolts rip overhead and tanks chug their greedy rounds.

Nothing of great interest seems to happen for what feels like an age. Castiel squats in the dirt until his ankles ache and his knees creak with every movement, and he waits beside his radioman for word, and the world is still, while overhead the air is ripped asunder by metal and

fire.

Then, Hester's voice crackles over the radio: "Three-platoon in position for move one—" and then there is gunfire around to the north, and word comes through from four – not that they necessarily needed verbal confirmation from Lieutenant Alistair, since the deafening noise of shelling starts up and rings all around them, shakes down leaves from the hedgerows and kicks up dust.

Castiel slaps Inias on the shoulder as he climbs to his feet to follow one-platoon upriver. "Wait for my word," he shouts over the din, and then he's gone.

A small dirt path takes them winding around the base of the hills up narrow lanes built up on either side with high dirt banks and shrubbery so that they can't see what they're running into until they're there.

There is open terrain between one half-destroyed building and another old barn, an exposed yard and a stretch of brick with parked vehicles, on the opposite side of which is a man-made shelter. Behind it is the dim glint of helmets and rifles in the sunlight. Castiel yells out, sweeps his hand in a wide gesture to the left, and the men sprint, but not before the Germans spot them.

There is a rattle of gunfire – bouncing off the brickwork, shattering church windows – and Private Richards rolls over into the dirt with a howl, kneecap wrecked, and Kris Chambers stumbles to a gradual halt. He staggers and trips, vomits blood. Castiel doesn't see anymore; there's already someone screaming for a medic, and he's busy sprinting for cover. The world is rushing wildly past him, and he trips on loose flagwork, and almost falls, but then he's crouched behind a fire hydrant, pressed flat to the stone.

From that position, he cautiously peers around to find where Lieutenant Hester has gone down – he finds him lying on his belly behind some flowers, panic on his face as he lifts his head to survey his platoon, but nonetheless getting the orders out: *squad three, retreat and right flank around the church – squads one and two pepper-pot up, take advantage of cover and get some smoke in.* Things seem under control.

Castiel tries to breathe easy. He doesn't think about dying. He doesn't.

He looks over again and finds the broad silhouette of Winchester knelt over one of the fallen; Castiel can't see what he's doing, but his hands are quick and steady, and his face is reassuring in its calm, and Castiel takes some comfort from knowing that someone is looking after them. God only knows they're going to need it.

13th July, 1944

Mail comes up again from Battalion HQ at the rear, and as the men whoop and laugh and exchange idle gossip from back home, Castiel tries not to let himself become distracted. It doesn't matter that he rarely gets mail; his best friend is here with him, and his family is few and far between, and they aren't close.

It's all irrelevant, anyway, as he doesn't need the distraction of what's going on at home. He can't spare the time or thought for wondering what is happening in Bedford, and instead can focus with greater intensity on his various tasks. He's already written up a progress report for the S-3 – came down through Martinville into La Madeleine to occupy the majority of the high ground north of Saint Lo, with the rest of the battalion, and cut off the Bayeux road to hem the Germans in; all while the 115th take Sainte Croix de Saint Lo, and the 175th swing around east. Fairly good work, if Castiel says so himself.

Now he glances between his crudely scrawled notes, scribbled in the light of a flare late last night, and attempts to transcribe his blunt, unfeeling descriptions of various casualties into a respectful report.

K.I.A. - Private Kris Chambers, one-platoon, Company B, 116th Regiment - suffered a bullet-wound to the abdomen, with multiple entry wounds suggesting damage to the pancreas and stomach. There was no exit wound. Private Chambers suffered internal bleeding in spite of medical treatment and passed on at approximately fourteen-fifteen hours, 13th July, 1944.

The notes say: *Pvt Chambers 1P ripped open.* There is a crude drawing of a person with pinpoints for where each person was hit. Inias, in a touch of black humour, had reached across last night to draw Xs for eyes and a tongue sticking out as the stick-figure died. Hardly tactful, but Castiel doesn't mind much – he is trying his best not to think of any of them as people. The scribble on the back of Dean's jagged handwriting describing each injury in more gruesome detail is bad enough.

After the disaster of the first few days, the battalion commanders and the overseeing general withdrew to discuss tactics, and now vast portions of the assaulting force is being reorganised and redistributed. The 29th Division get the day off to recover, to rest and eat up and get themselves ready for the next few days – or at least the infantrymen do. It's not so much the case for officers. There's a lot to think about.

Replacements are coming in fresh from the boats to fill in the company's gaps, and Castiel has to make sure that they have all the necessary equipment, that they're in the right place in the company, that the various platoons are still balanced in terms of what firepower is placed where. A few days ago, he was concerned about making a good impression on them; this is no longer the case.

The soldiers – not people, not people – laugh raucously at something as Dean rants at length about something in his letter. Castiel frowns up at them, and makes a point of catching Sergeant Masters' eye. He

doesn't say anything; he just looks at Masters until the first sergeant gets to his feet and orders everyone to settle down, be quiet, *we're in this tactical, assholes – try not to get us shelled before I can get some fuckin' shut-eye, alright?* There are mumbled apologies, some friendly ribbing at Sergeant Masters' expense, which he only smirks at, and Castiel looks across to find Dean still grinning.

Dean glances up and meets his eyes.

Castiel looks down at his report immediately. He does not need any reason for Dean to feel encouraged into coming over. He doesn't want to speak to Dean; he's busy.

"You get any mail, lieutenant?" Dean calls over, in something of a stage-whisper in lieu of Sergeant Masters' chastisement.

Castiel ignores him. He checks his notes for the next casualty to write down. Lance Corporal Pamuk: lost a leg below the shin.

"Sir?" Dean tries again, raising his voice a little more in spite of Corporal Harvelle elbowing him in the stomach to shut up. "Lieutenant Novak, sir, did you get any—"

"No, I didn't," Castiel says without looking up.

Dean gets to his feet, and as Castiel inwardly chants, *no, no, no, stay where you are, do not come over here*, he comes striding across the harbour area. "That's a little sad," Dean says conversationally – Castiel spares a moment to try and decide whether or not the comment is insulting, and comes to the conclusion that he is too tired to care. "Here, sir, you can have my letter, pretend it's yours. Read about Sam and my shitty dad being a dumb-ass, it'll really help with your mood."

Castiel fights the impulse to roll his eyes. He doesn't need help pretending to have a shitty father. "My mood is just fine," he replies curtly – and then, as he realises what he has said, he adds as a warning, "Don't."

Dean bites his lower lip and tries not to laugh. He looks down at his letter instead. "So my brother, Sammy, went to this party, right?" he starts, smiling wide. "Only he didn't tell my dad it was a party – said it was a study group."

"Winchester," Castiel sighs. He rubs a hand across his forehead.

"Honestly? It's not like dad would've cared either way, and he probably wasn't even listening, but sometimes he gets a little weird about Sam socialising instead of, I dunno, 'helping the family to get along', he says, whatever the fuck that means—"

Castiel balls one hand into a fist. "Winchester, I really don't need—"

"But basically, Sammy didn't tell him shit. Only problem is that while he's out, dad gets into some trouble – a fight or something, I think, and so he gets tossed into a cell for the night, and he's allowed to ask to see someone so! He asks for Sammy but, shi-i-it, Sammy's not around, because he's with this girl and so my *dad* says—"

"Winchester, shut the fuck up," Castiel snaps.

Dean flinches, but he does fall silent.

“I do not care.” Castiel stares dead at him, eyes hard. “I really don’t. I don’t know what you think this is, here, sergeant, but let me clear it up for you – I’m not your mother. I’m not your friend. And I am sure as shit not interested in your fucking home life. I’m busy, Winchester. Get the hell out of here.”

There is the twitch of muscle in Dean’s throat as he gulps down disappointment. Castiel pretends not to notice the way his face falls. That’s when he notices a man – young, skinny, pale-faced; obviously one of the replacements – standing nervously just behind Dean’s shoulder and watching the interaction.

Castiel tilts to one side to catch his gaze and narrows his eyes at him. “Can I help you?”

Dean – correctly – assumes that’s his cue to leave, and he turns away without another word. In the meantime, Castiel taps his pencil agitatedly between his fingers as he listens to Private Benji Rosen anxiously ramble about some equipment malfunction that Castiel has neither the patience, nor the time, nor the means to fix for him.

“I’m sorry, private,” Castiel interrupts at last, and if the harsh edge of his voice makes the kid jerk back slightly, he tries not to let himself care, “but I can’t help you with this. First Sergeant Masters will be more than happy to assist, I’m sure.”

Castiel raises a hand to point out Mark Masters, where he is shovelling sloppy meat from the ration packs into his mouth with gusto. As he does, he catches sight of Dean where he stands across the harbour area, in conversation with Joe Harvelle and Benny Lafitte, with his hands in his pockets. He looks like a kicked dog.

Dean’s mouth is shaping words that Castiel cannot distinguish, and his face twists somewhat ruefully, and then out of nowhere, he is lifting

his eyes, and he looks at Castiel.

Their eyes meet. Castiel looks away.

He finds himself staring for several moments at First Sergeant Masters, watching him help Private Rosen – not out of interest, but simply because he doesn't know whether Dean is still looking at him, and he doesn't know how to continue going about his work with Dean's disappointed gaze on him like an abandoned puppy.

There is a flare of irritation in his stomach that he let himself get into this situation – this is *his* company, these are *his* men, and he is more than entitled to get annoyed at someone jeopardising his ability to concentrate on the tasks needed to keep them safe. He doesn't need Dean making him feel guilty and distracted from afar just because he lost his temper. Castiel doesn't understand why on earth Dean is so hurt by it, anyway. He's not some delicate little private fresh off the boat thinking that the company commanding officer is going to be his best friend. He's tough and he's shrewd and he understands the way this works. Moreover, Castiel is sure that he's lost his temper with Dean more times than he can count on both hands, and so can't comprehend why this time is the time that Dean is going to sulk about it.

Castiel looks down at his report. It doesn't matter; he certainly isn't going to lose any sleep over it. He reaches into his pocket, flicks absent-mindedly at the dented corner of his cigarette tin. He could give two shits about Dean Winchester's opinion of him.

He glances up - just once, quickly. Dean is laughing now, with that tilt of his shoulders, that crease of his brow. Something in Castiel aches to see it, and his hands itch to bring him back.

By daybreak the next day they're back on the assault again. The 137th can't advance further towards Hill 122, but the skies are clear enough for air support, and the 116th are pushing back down the Bayeux highway towards the city. In terms of physical proximity, Baker Company are so close to Saint Lo that they can almost taste it – in the brick dust heavy in the air, the scorching heat when a shell goes off nearby and they breathe in too deep. Castiel wonders sometimes if he'll ever get used to the flavour of gunpowder and metal on his tongue when he eats.

None of this is to say, however, that victory is imminent – far from it. A series of shells take out no less than seven of their tanks in the space of an hour, meaning to that their attempt to spearhead their way into the city is shot to pieces; a little after thirteen-hundred hours, a barrage of mortars zeroed to land precisely across their front line forces them to retreat almost all the way back over the ridge. Needless to say, Battalion HQ are less than impressed. Castiel doesn't know what he was supposed to do – push on and lose half his men? – and so remains convinced that he did the right thing, but in spite of this, he feels the chastisement keenly. He should be better.

Baker pushes along the ridge and regains the highway after a gruelling hour's firefight, and they find themselves making slow progress towards the city, with the help of their artillery hissing overhead to pummel the German positions at the town's outer edges. Muzzle-flash lights up the low buildings either side of the road, and every couple seconds they to cringe back or duck for cover as the mortars come in again.

The sky overhead is more smoke than sunlight; at a glance, it sometimes seem as though the clouds are due to split with rain, but instead there is the whistle and scream of shells as they burst through with a scattering of shrapnel. Castiel's limbs are heavy with the fear of it, as though sodden.

Sergeant Barnes leads his squad up to break through a broken-down concrete building one side of the highway, and gunfire chatters off the walls as they burst in. Private Roy takes a bullet through the chest and keels back onto the blacktop with a dull red spray; Corporal Harvelle has a sliver of shrapnel come close enough that it cleanly slices the strap of his rifle, but manages to escape harm. The men are a solid line moving along the secured highway, with the city like a mirage forever hopping one step back for every hundred feet they gain. They're running again in the blind hope that the cover of their mortar fire can buy them a few yards, but they still have enemy fire bearing down on them, cutting sharply into the dust and tearing up flesh when it meets desperate, sprinting bodies.

Castiel is in the middle – at the front is most likely to get hit, at the back is the target of deliberate fire just in case an officer hides out at the rear – and is weaving left, right, left again, as he runs to get ahead without taking a round to the face, when his ankle rolls over. He finds himself sitting in the dirt, then, with pain twisting up through one leg. He lets out a string of curse words before shimmying down in the dirt to make himself as small a target as possible while he re-laces the injured foot's boot to support him. Once satisfied that he's securely strapped in, he flips over to get back to his feet, and at that moment, a hand slips around him to tuck under his arm and help haul him upright.

There's a part of Castiel that is, childishly, still pissed off, and so for a split-second he entertains the thought of shoving Dean away and telling him to fuck off, but that would only result in trouble – and more importantly, in their continuing to be vulnerable, where the enemy could easily pick them off – and so Castiel lets him.

Dean's hand is on his side, and then on his back, and it trails slow fingers across his shoulder blades as Castiel settles his weight on his own two feet, and then Castiel sets off again, in spite of Dean's voice calling, "You alright, sir?" after him.

Then there is an explosion that nearly takes him off his feet, having only just stood up, and there is smoke billowing from the few

remaining windows of the buildings to the left of the highway. Someone runs past with blood streaked across their face; Private Tran is gesturing frantically for some green replacement man who doesn't know what the hell he's doing to get out of the way.

"Medic!"

Next comes the beating drum of many feet thundering past, and there are men with dirt on their faces, and there are bruised, battered, beaten men at his side speaking to him, but either as a result of the bomb or something else, but Castiel is momentarily distracted by the sight of two men hauling out Sergeant Barnes by the shoulders of his jacket.

There's a hole the size of a man's fist in one of his legs, his shin floppy from the injury down, and burns on one size of his face that seem to blister and crack as Castiel watches. Pat Barnes, the idiot, is just laughing in borderline hysteria. There is a splash of something wet and fleshy across his upper lip.

"Jesus fuck, what a day this has been," Barnes gets out, and he drops his head back to rest in the dirt as the men lay him down. "Fuck me. Fuck."

As Dean coming sprinting up with morphine already in hand, Castiel looks away. He takes a deep breath.

Baker Company and the 116th continue moving up.

In the late afternoon, the German defence seems to give slightly, and for the first time, Castiel feels a hot flutter in his chest of excitement – they can do it, they're going to take the city after all. They push on towards Saint Lo in formation, rifles pulled to their shoulders with the

greedy chug of mortars overhead. Ahead of them are explosions; in the distance, Castiel can hear tank shells striking concrete, with the now-familiar sound of a building collapsing. There are his NCOs up ahead, screaming themselves roar with sharp hand gestures to their squads – move up, suppressive fire, switch left – and they huddle into the brick dust and rubble of the city walls as the mortar-teams a couple hundred feet fire, and fire, and fire.

They push forwards, and they are within sight of the German position when Private Pond comes sprinting up with the receiver of his radio clutched tight in one hand, held out towards Castiel, and he bursts out, “Sir – sir! Battalion HQ on the line, say it’s urgent – sir, they—”

Castiel twists back to where Inias is crouched behind him in anticipation of orders, and with a quick slap to his elbow, directs him off across the street to take his platoon around a low-slung wooden barn to take the position. Then he ducks back into better cover behind a disused truck, and takes the receiver off Pond.

The message comes through crackly and indistinct, but Castiel understands: Hold your position. Do not go any further. Hold and get secure.

A flutter of anxiety makes itself known in the pit of Castiel’s stomach as he feels himself begin to picture all the ways in which something could have gone terribly wrong – because this just doesn’t make sense. They’re so close to the German position that if the whole battalion just exerts all their force one this one route then they could break into the city by nightfall; moreover, pull back to hold here doesn’t make any strategic sense. There’s little to no cover here, not for an entire company. They need to but he forces himself to take a deep breath and steady himself. He hands the receiver back to Private Pond. “Thank you,” he says, and that’s all he has time for; he leaves Pond bewildered with his radio as he takes off running after Inias and two-platoon.

As they move on towards assaulting and taking the defensive position in the distance, the Germans zero in on them, and so Castiel's sprint across the field towards them is marked by quick breathing, the fear in his throat. Shells come down heavy, kick the ground up beneath his feet so that his knees jerk out underneath him and nearly take him to the floor; there are pillars of smoke and dry dirt rising like a punch from the earth, and his eyes are stinging with it. Gunfire chatters angrily, tears up the ground in front of his feet, and although he swerves and he zigzags to stay out of their sights, he hears each crack of the enemy rifles and hears his name in it – this will be the one that takes him.

Thankfully, Inias sees him coming and yells out for his platoon to lay down suppressive fire so that he can get to their position without being taken out, and Castiel comes crashing behind their base of fire so hard that when he reaches Inias he nearly bowls him over.

Inias throws out an arm to catch him, holds him still as he struggles back up into a crouch, and shifts his helmet back onto his head so that Castiel can actually see out from under it. "Novak?" Inias says, with a quick glance back at his men as they lay their rounds down heavy on the enemy position. "Cas?"

Castiel drags in a deep breath. "Pull back."

"What?"

"Pull back, Inias, I don't know what's happening but we gotta—"

"Cas, we're in the middle of a—"

"Wallace!" Castiel snaps, and he sees Inias' eyes open wide at Castiel one step from pulling rank. "Pull back. Now."

Inias doesn't question it further. He turns to his men and he's barking orders when Castiel drags himself back up onto his feet to run again.

Three-platoon is the other side of the field, along the line of hedgerows; four-platoon is back at the Martinville to lay down light artillery on the German positions from a distance, so they're far enough back to be safe; one-platoon, on the other hand, is up at the front somewhere, pushing up the main route and taking the majority of the artillery fire – maintaining most of the pressure from Baker Company to cover Dog as they bound up along the ridge to try and out-flank the Germans.

Castiel ducks into a crouch in a position of natural cover where the ground swells up in a small hillock with a ditch just behind, and he takes a moment to assess. Fifty feet or so to three-platoon, with fairly good cover. Another fifty feet up ahead of that to one-platoon, but it's along the main road with minimal cover, right in the line of sight of the German position. At least eighty feet back in the opposite direction to get to Alistair and four-platoon.

He takes a deep breath, and he moves.

Castiel gets Baker Company pulled back to a small hamlet of farmhouses near La Madeleine, far enough that they can make themselves secure, albeit spread thin and scattered between sparse bits of cover, but there is still no sign of the chaos letting up. Everywhere he looks, there are runners and radiomen hurrying back and forth between platoons and company, between battalion HQ and commanders. Non-commissioned officers are crouched together in hastily-constructed shell-scrapings with worried expressions, deep in discussion, and enlisted men are laid low in their defensive positions with exhaustion written all over their faces, and then Captain Laufeyson comes jogging past.

“Do you know what’s happening?” Castiel asks, turning to follow.

Gabriel spins as he heads past, holds his hands up in a gesture that sits halfway between surrender and a shrug. “On my way to try find out – I’ll let you know!”

Letting out a rough breath, Castiel watches him go. His shoulders slump. He doesn’t know what to do with himself – he doesn’t want to be among the men, because they’ll ask him about what’s going on, and he doesn’t know what to tell them. All the same, he doesn’t want to be alone either, because his brain just starts spinning with disaster situations and he feels the itch to sit down and plan the company’s next move, to keep his men safe, but he can’t do that if he doesn’t know what is going to be happening next. He tries to take deep breaths and he rummages through his webbing to see if he has any K-rations leftover.

The chug and whistle of mortars overhead is slowing; the tremors through the earth and quaking up into his knees are more infrequent. They hit far enough away way that Castiel no longer has to throw himself into the dirt screaming *take cover, take cover*, but somehow that just serves to make him more anxious. They are on the front-line – what could possibly have gone wrong to mean that the Germans are no longer peppering them with fire and artillery shells?

Thankfully, Gabriel comes back within the half-hour, waving off Captain Azazel as they peel off in different directions.

“Well, there’s good news and there’s bad news,” Gabriel starts as he approaches, and he lets out a long sigh as he pulls off his helmet, tucks in under one arm, runs a hand back through his sweaty hair.

“Okay,” Castiel says slowly.

“The good news is that we’ve pushed through the German line and from here it should be easy to push into the city,” Gabriel says. He doesn’t make eye contact, instead choosing to look away through the darkening evening along the road they came down.

Castiel waits.

“The bad news is that that’s not where we’re meant to be – i.e. with the rest of the regiment.”

A chill feeling of dread is gradually building in Castiel’s stomach. “Which is?”

“About a mile or so back.”

For several seconds, Castiel can only stare at him. Then he repeats, “A mile.”

“Yeah.”

Castiel reaches into the pocket of his combat jacket for his cigarette tin. Gabriel offers him a light.

They stand in silence for a while to process the news. Gabriel lights up too, and they stay together, exhaling smoke. In the distance, there are dim sounds from the men as they take on water and food and mutter amongst themselves. They’re probably wondering what’s going on, what the plan is. Castiel doesn’t know how to tell them that he doesn’t fucking know, and that from the looks of it, nobody does.

He doesn't even have the energy to ask what the hell happened with the battalion commander for them to wind up five hundred yards or so behind the German front and isolated from the rest of the regiment. He simply lets out a plume of smoke that coils up palely from his lips and says, "Laufeyson, why is it always us?"

Gabriel laughs at that. "What, you're asking me? Shit."

"Omaha, Grandcamp, now this?"

"Looks like someone up there is fucking with us, kid," Gabriel says softly, and he takes a drag.

Castiel's free hand finds its way to the small bronze crucifix around his throat. It's warm from the touch of his skin, and he likes to think that means it's making itself useful somehow. He toys with it, between two fingers, and tries to entertain the notion of God picking on him. "No," he says at last. "Just Major Campbell, I think."

"Major Isaacs is trying to talk to the battalion commander but he's all busy trying to get in touch with the rest of the regiment, so everything is screwed to hell," Gabriel says around the butt of his cigarette, his voice distorted by the effort of keeping it in his mouth. "What I heard so far is that the commander was back at the supply lines when we got the order to halt so we just… kept going."

Castiel exhales smoke. He doesn't have a response to that.

He and Captain Laufeyson talk a little, smoke a lot, but the weight of their battalion's mistake weighs heavy on them both, and so they make for poor company. German fire on the rest of the division

behind them meant that there was no way for them to retreat back to their old positions, and equally no way for anyone else to come up to support them. Blind luck meant that so far, out of sheer negligence, the Germans haven't noticed their position, and so are not attacking them – because Castiel has no doubt that if they get detected, they will in all probability be completely annihilated before regimental commanders would even think of a way to send up reinforcements.

They called into a meeting with the other company commanding officers later, to discuss the plan. They can't withdraw back to the regiment – Able Company already tried, but German artillery firing on the rest of the 116th cuts them off and makes retreat impossible – and they wouldn't dare to keep going with only their small number against the entirety of the Saint Lo occupying force. In short, they're more or less trapped in an exposed position, waiting for the Germans to figure out just how fucked they are, while regimental HQ desperately think of a rescue strategy.

Some hours later finds Castiel alone - sitting on his haunches, hands clasped in front of his mouth like he's warming his fingers on his breath, but it feels more like he's trying to hold himself together. He breathes in and out.

He can hear the men bickering and joking as they fortify their shell-scrapings on the other side of their position – Sergeant Lafitte telling some joke about two blondes getting on a bus; Private Tran griping about his feet hurting and his wrist hurting and his elbow hurting; Zeddmore and Spruce singing some tuneless ditty from a radio commercial about soap. He feels tired and old just listening to them. He doesn't know how they can be so unrelentingly cheerful with everything that's being thrown at them, day in, day out.

They're alone up here. The battalion is at sixty percent strength altogether – lacking half of Charlie Company, one heavy weapons squad from Dog Company, and battalion staff, as well as being depleted by casualties – and they're cut off. The battalion CO has had them spread out into a defensive perimeter, but it doesn't make Castiel feel any less like a duck in a barrel.

In almost every direction he turns, he can see men sprawled out in the dirt – in pairs with one guy turning his rifle outwards to keep an eye on the horizon, the other digging a safe space from the two of them. Back the way they came, there are pale twists of smoke rising in front of the remainder of the 116th where the ground has finally settled from its shelling; for an hour or so, the sky has been quiet on this side of the city, the Germans having given up with the artillery, so the hot metal and broken earth is left to cool and cut up the distance between them.

Castiel runs through the day's casualties in his head. Lunn, Harrison, Rutherford. T-3 Corporal Rowan. Sergeant Barnes. He tries to imagine who might be dead by this time tomorrow, and before the thought has even entirely formulated inside his mind, he can feel his breath starting to come quick with panic.

Then there comes, "Hey, sweetheart—" and Castiel near-enough jumps out of his skin.

"Fuck, Winchester," he swears, and he shoots a glare over his shoulder.

Dean holds his hands up in front of him – don't shoot. "Sorry. Thought you heard me coming over."

Castiel doesn't bother to dignify that with an answer. Several seconds transpire without a word, then, as Dean stands awkwardly to one side of Castiel: first shifting his weight from foot to foot, then shoving his hands into the pockets of his combats and squinting away at the fire-torn night sky. He wants to say something, Castiel can tell, but he just doesn't know how.

“What is it, sergeant?” Castiel asks impatiently. He huffs on his hands again, cupped around in front of his mouth, and then, for want of something to occupy his hands, he digs into his combat jacket for his cigarette tin. He’s going to be chain-smoking soon.

Dean lets out a short breath. “Nothing, sir. I just – I, uh, I wanted to see if you were okay.”

Castiel’s hands become still on his cigarette tin, clutched in one hand, and he looks up at Dean. He narrows his eyes suspiciously. That can’t be all.

Dean raises his eyebrows, lifts his shoulders slightly in a half-shrug. “You okay, sir?”

Castiel doesn’t take his eyes off him, still dubious. “Fine.”

“I gotta take care of everyone in the company, you know. Includes you.”

“Yes, I appreciate that.”

“So if you’re not okay—”

“I’m fine, Winchester.”

“—you gotta tell me. None of this stoic bullshit, alright? You gotta—”

Castiel rolls his eyes. “Winchester,” he interrupts, his tone sharp, and he holds Dean’s eyes. “I promise.”

Dean stares at him for a second with an expression that is hard and unflinching, intense enough that Castiel’s skin prickles not-quite-uncomfortably, but whatever it is that he sees there, it seems to satisfy him. He tilts his chin up, almost defiant. “Good.”

Slightly exasperated by Dean’s aggressive care-taking, Castiel looks away and flicks distractedly at the dented corner of his cigarette tin.

“By the way, uh.” Dean cuts himself off. He scratches at the back of his neck. “Sir, I just wanted to say that I’m sorry – for the other day. For bugging you.”

Castiel lifts his eyes to him again, and squints. “What?”

“When you were busy and I was trying to talk shit to you about Sammy – my brother, that is. With my letter.”

“Oh.” Castiel pulls his helmet off with one hand, runs the other hand backwards through his hair. It’s thick with sweat and grime, and he feel it sticking up on end, but he doesn’t care. “To be honest with you, Winchester, I don’t even remember,” he says.

He does remember. He remembers the guilt rotting inside his chest at the idea of lashing out at one of the few people looking out for him in this company; he remembers how crushed Dean had looked, the disappointed slope of his broad shoulders as he retreated back to the rest of the NCOs.

Dean frowns. “Oh. Okay. Well – never mind, then.”

Castiel would feel even worse for lying to him now, and effectively invalidating his apology, but he doesn’t have any time to deal with Dean’s precious little feelings, and less time still to pet Dean on the head and tell him he’s doing a good job. He has more important things to think about. He tucks a cigarette between his lips, mutters around it, “I hope you’re ready for tomorrow.”

Dean arches his eyebrows. “Why’s that?”

Castiel fumbles for a moment with his lighter, his fingers blunt and clumsy, and then, swearing under his breath, he waves his arm around in the general direction of Saint Lo. “Look around, Winchester. We’re completely cut off. As soon as the Germans figure that out…” he trails off ominously and tries again with his lighter.

Dean plucks the lighter from his hands and leans across to flick the flame on for him. “You think we’re fucked,” he says.

“I didn’t say that.” Castiel inhales deeply, filling his lungs until his throat stings and he feels the itch of a cough at the back of his throat. “But I do think you’re going to have your work cut out for you.”

“Shit. So we really are fucked.”

Castiel exhales smoke. “We’ll be fine,” he says dismissively, and he regrets now having lost enough self-control to let slip his doubts and fears. He should keep everything more buttoned-up; he shouldn’t have let Dean inside, even for a moment. Then, already preoccupied with the mistakes he’s made, he says without thinking, “We’ve got a good team of medics.”

Dean tosses his head back in an obnoxious laugh, grin spread wide, and when he tips his head back down, he peeks up Castiel almost coyly through dusty eyelashes. “Shit, sir, is that a compliment?”

Goddamnit – it actually was. Castiel throws him a withering look over his two hands sheltering the glowing end of his cigarette. “It’s nothing,” he grunts, cigarette twitching between his lips as he speaks. “Don’t get excited.”

“That’s going in my diary for sure,” Dean exclaims delightedly. He rocks back on his heels, and he holds his hands out in front of him, spreading fingers wide as though envisioning a headline. “15th of July – Lieutenant Novak said something nice to me. Could this be the start of something beautiful? Stay tuned for more possible—”

Castiel narrows his eyes at him. “Shut the hell up, Winchester.”

Dean beams. “That’s more like it.”

16th July, 1944

Dawn breaks with a shattering of the sky, mortars and artillery shells spilling down, and Castiel is already screaming. *Hold the line. Maintain suppressive fire.* He throws his arm over his head to protect himself as he runs between platoons, and he knows he has to get into cover, now – the only problem is that the platoons are spread somewhat thin in order to hold the defensive perimeter, and so he is caught out in the open between safe spaces. He pushes himself into a hard sprint, ignorant of the sharp sting of his calf muscles, and he yells out again for his men. *Hold, hold.*

Metal hits the ground, vomits dirt and smoke up from the earth, and he goes sprinting unflinchingly through – no idea what he'll find on the other side, no idea if the next mortar will take him out on his way between one- and three-platoon. He breathes ragged, his pulse pounding in his ears so heavy it threatens to throw him off-balance. He weaves and zig-zags and there, up ahead, is a shell-scraping he can get into until the shelling eases up.

"Here, Lieutenant, here," someone is yelling from the scraping as they duck down in the dirt, and Castiel can't recognise the blur of faces tucked close to the ground until he's stumbling, skidding, and dropping down onto his belly so hard that he crashes into them.

Castiel fights for breath, face-down in the dirt, and when he feels secure enough to lift his head, he wriggles around to untangle himself from the foxhole's original occupants – identifiable now as Corporal Ash Lowell and Private Bradbury.

Ash lifts a finger to tip his helmet. "Evening, sir."

"Hi," Castiel says breathlessly. "You alright?"

"Can't complain," Charlie says, with a good attempt to be cheerful, although his face is pinched and pale with worry.

From the other side of the platoon comes a hoarse scream: *medic!* Castiel pushes himself up onto his elbows as high as he dares to peer around, but bullets are ricocheting off stones and slicing into the grass. He pulls his head back down.

"Who was that?" Charlie wonders aloud, and he chews on his lower lip.

“Sounded like Poole, I think.”

“Shit.”

They glance at each other, eyes wide, until Castiel says roughly, “Eyes forward. Hold the line.” The shells have eased off, and while the odd handful of rounds still chatter down to mark up the ground and kick up dust, it seems safe enough for Castiel to move.

He climbs to his feet and hurries, bent low, between shell-scrapings to check on the men until he gets to one where he finds First Sergeant Masters, helping one of the replacements with rifle stoppage.

“Masters, get out there,” Castiel tells him as he comes in to crouch beside him. “Check on the men, work out how we’re doing for casualty and ammunition. Get them to fortify their positions and knuckle down – I’m expecting a counter-attack at some point and we need to ready.”

First Sergeant Masters gives a sharp nod, and with a reassuring clap to the shoulder of the young replacement, he pushes himself up and takes off running.

With one hand on the top of his helmet to keep it steady, Castiel sits back on his heels and surveys the nearby men - and he spots the casualty nearby that Bradbury and Lowell heard calling for help.

Lance Corporal Richardson is flat on his back in his shell-scraping, and Private Poole, who Charlie Bradbury had heard, supports his head in his hands while Dean exerts pressure on a wound spurting blood from his chest. Castiel takes a deep breath and looks away.

They remain cut off all day, under considerable artillery and mortar, and for most of the morning it shows no signs of letting up. In spite of this, no counter-attack reaches them as Castiel and the other company commanding officers had expected. It makes them feel somewhat uneasy, in complete honesty, but Castiel is nonetheless grateful.

He doesn't know that they could cope with a counter-attack – as it is, they're cut off from the Regiment, unable to re-supply ammunition, rations, or medical supplies; unable to evacuate casualties and so losing more men than is necessary. There is only one radio connection back to Regimental staff, which is held by Major Isaacs, who is two companies away from Castiel and Baker. Everything is up in the air and they are stretched thin.

Private Spruce is loading a new clip into his rifle when a stray bullet from the Germans cuts through his nose and buries itself deep inside his brain; he slumps into his own clenched hand, still holding the clip, and is still. Frank Dodds can't get into cover fast enough when the shells start raining down again and the medics can't even find enough that they'd be able to send him back to the aid station anyway. A direct mortar hit takes out Fox Company's only remaining medic, so Castiel sends across Corporal Teddy du Mort to help out until they can make contact with the regiment. Castiel was right in one aspect – Dean Winchester has got his work cut out for him.

According to information from Captain Laufeyson, the 3rd Battalion of the 116th is making its way down the Martinville ridge to provide reinforcements for the isolated companies out by Saint Lo, but if this is the case, Castiel has seen no evidence of it yet.

They run low on ammunition until Castiel is running back and forth between platoons with the order for men to only use grenades, and then if there is some kind of counter-attack, he calls for the liberal use of bayonets. The very idea of close-quarters combat under these circumstances is bringing Castiel out in a cold sweat.

One company from the 3rd Battalion does break through to Able Company by late afternoon, sharing rations but not, unfortunately, ammunition. It seems that everyone is having to make do, and while Castiel is in some small part grateful for the extra K-rations to hand out to his men to keep their spirits up, it's not what they really needed. Their defensive perimeter is weak under a near-relentless barrage of enemy fire and artillery, and Baker Company don't have enough rounds to deter any kind of assault that the Germans might launch. Castiel is still waiting for the enemy to figure that out.

Nonetheless, the presence of another battalion allows a few of his more exhausted men to switch out and get some rest off the front-line. They can't go far, of course, seeing as they are more or less surrounded at present, but even being allowed to sit back with a cup of coffee and not have to worry about being on watch is doing wonders for some of the soldiers. Castiel counts it a small victory for Baker and the rest of the 2nd Battalion – until he spots the first turret rising behind the German position. And then the second.

For several moments, Castiel doesn't even react. He is frozen where he crouches, and he watches the turrets grow more prominent as the Panzers creep over the brow of the hill.

There has been a lull in enemy fire for a good forty minutes or so; Castiel should have known it not to be good news. He watches them make their slow and threatening progress, and he slowly comes to realise that he has no idea what to do.

"Tank sighting, twelve o'clock!" comes out from the side of the all-round defensive closest to the town, the battle-cry coming like a ripple as one man after another spot the inevitable and yell the message down the line. With every new sighting, the words drum into Castiel's skull like a jackhammer, over and over. They're coming; they're coming; they're coming.

First Sergeant Masters is suddenly in front of him, eyes hard. “Sir, we’ve got at least three Panzer tanks coming down from the German position, what do you—”

“Nothing we can do, Masters – hold the line,” Castiel says, and he pushes past him towards the front-line. He breaks into a jog and raises his voice to a shout: “Dig in and fortify your shell-scrapings – Lieutenant Azazel?” he twists his head back to the centre of their position. “Bring four-platoon up to switch out with two-platoon for light artillery resistance – now! Other platoon leaders on me!”

In the wake of his orders there comes a flurry of movement – the clack of metal as tripods are snapped up, ammunition belts being slung over shoulders. Entrenching tools are coming out for a last-ditch attempt to deepen shell-scrapings so that they have better cover and someone, somewhere, is singing a high-pitched song of the lyrics, *we’re so fucked* to a Glen Miller melody.

Within thirty seconds, Castiel is surrounded by his officers, and he tries to detach himself from each one of their faces. He has known these men for two years – has known Inias for sixteen years – and a German Panzer unit is coming down the hill for them. “I want fifty per cent of our company’s machine-gun force concentrated at twelve o’clock to fire on the main road, centre of axis. Mortars behind them for suppressive artillery fire, riflemen interspersed.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hester and Virgil, send a runner each to the other companies and see if we can get any extra firepower down here,” Castiel tells them, and he glances quickly back over his shoulder at the top of the highway where the Panzers are making their slow approach. He lets out a rough breath. “We’re going to need it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s all, you’re dismissed – now get going.”

With that, Hester, Virgil, and Azazel are gone. Inias hangs around a moment longer, touches a hand to Castiel’s elbow.

“You need to get to your platoon, Inias,” Castiel says, and he barely looks at Inias. “Have them spread between one- and three-platoon to support the mortar-men.”

“Cas,” Inias says. “Breathe.”

Castiel looks at him. He can feel his fists balled up tight at his sides, and he can feel the tension all through his body, the length of his spine; he doesn’t need Inias to tell him that he’s stressed out. He holds himself back from snapping – just barely – and instead gives a curt nod.

Inias seems satisfied, and so he turns to run back to his own platoon.

With his eyes on the horizon, where the Panzers lower and zero their turrets, Castiel takes careful steps through the company. “Private Pond?” he calls out, his gaze unmoving. “On me.”

The radioman scrambles onto his feet and runs for Castiel’s side, and almost as though Castiel had, in calling for a radio, given some signal that he was ready, the tanks crack and slam like thunder, and the first shells scream into the sky.

“Take cover,” Castiel yells, and then the shells hit the ground with a sound like thunder and he is thrown to the ground as the earth bucks beneath his feet. Shrapnel shreds the sky and the grass. Someone is screaming for help.

The Panzers take greedy gulps of air as they lay waste to the fields and the ridges of the Bayeux highway, spewing fire and metal that tear great holes in the countryside and shake Castiel until his bones rattle. He curls shamelessly into the dirt, a cowering ball. As he presses his face against the loose earth, one hand finds its way to the small bronze crucifix around his neck, and he thinks, *not today, not like this.*

At the first opportunity – a momentary lull in the tank’s firing – Castiel crawls blindly forwards in the direction of where he last saw his radioman.

“Pond,” he yells from flat on his belly, his voice hoarse from the smoke, “get Major Isaacs on the line and get him to request heavy artillery support – twenty-one-hundred mils, ninety-five degrees east of axis—” and then, without waiting any longer than the split-second required to get Pond’s confirmation, he scrambles up onto his feet and away.

Medic, medic, medic, is ringing from at least two different parts of the company, and Castiel runs on wobbly legs to find out how bad the damage is to his men.

He has not reached the next platoon over before the barrage starts up again, and he pushes himself into a desperate sprint for the nearest fox-hole as the piercing whistle of shells overhead grows louder and louder still.

If you can hear the shell, you’ll be fine. He throws himself down into the dirt at the moment when the ground is seizing up to meet him with

the brutal impact of enemy artillery, and it jars his weak shoulder with a pain so sharp and fierce that his vision whites out.

There is a groan and some incoherent profanity bursting from his mouth, and then he drags himself jerkily upright. No time for weakness here.

He moves for the next platoon over as fast as he can, gritting his teeth against the heavy pulse of pain through his shoulder and arm, and then – as though the day couldn't get any worse – rapid gunfire comes in from the German position. The men of Baker Company are further scattered as the bullets tear sharp red holes.

Castiel drops back down onto his belly, and then rolls over so that he can lift his head and assess the damage nearby. Three men down – two machine-gunners, plus Corporal Doe. The rest fall back to get better cover, but the most important fact is that there is now a gap in the perimeter that they no longer have enough men to fill. He tips his head back, drags in a gasp, and yells, "Medic!"

He shifts around to prop himself up on his elbows, crawls forwards on his belly until he can get up behind a low hedge and get ready to move. He runs hard and fast, exposed to the gunners as he makes his way towards the far side of the main road, and he swears he can feel the biting kiss of the metal at his heels. This time it'll get him; this time he's dead. He risks a glance around as he runs – when he's confident he won't fall over something – and finds the field bare of any new movement when he knows for a fact that Winchester is over past the main road with three-platoon. He yells again – *medic, we need a medic* – and veers left for cover in a decomposing clutter of derelict chicken sheds, and then there is a solid weight crashing into him hard, almost toppling him over. Castiel, without thinking, throws his hands up to grab on and support himself, as well as to potentially push back whatever thoughtless asshole just ran right into him. As the world slows from the rapid-impact blur of the crash, everything comes back into focus, and Castiel finds himself two inches from Sergeant Dean Winchester, both hands on his chest.

For a moment, Castiel just stares at him in astonishment – he doesn't know why it's so unexpected, as he did just call for a medic, but the memory is distant to him now. It's hard to keep a clear view of what was going on and what was supposed to be happening when he can feel Dean's pulse thrumming faintly beneath his fingers, when they are close enough to one other to feel the warmth of each other's bodies. If Castiel stretched up just slightly, their the tips of their noses would touch. He can count the freckles dusted across Dean's cheeks, the bridge of his nose.

"Dean," Castiel says. He doesn't mean to say it – it just falls out of his unbidden, surprised at his presence, more surprised still at his unexpected proximity – and worst of all is the way he says it. He says Dean's name on a quiet exhalation, open-mouthed. It sounds vulnerable.

"Sir, I—" Dean starts, but he gets no further. He looks into Castiel's face with an expression like he's been struck by a lightning bolt – like every inch of him is frozen into perfect glass, but that he's nonetheless electrified, every nerve ending fizzing. His lips part, move silently as though he's searching for words, but finds none. He takes a long breath. Castiel feels the air fill his lungs, Dean's chest inflating slowly beneath his hands.

Castiel's eyes fall to those hands, mapping the breadth of Dean's body without even realising what he's doing, and when he slowly trails his eyes back up – across the exposed ridge of his collarbone where his combat shirt has rumpled up; up the length of his throat, Adam's apple, jugular, the hinge of his jaw – he is trapped by Dean's open mouth. The pink flush of his lips, the dull wet shine just inside his mouth, the edge of his teeth. Castiel wants to taste him. This is not the time or the place, and men are injured on the field that Dean needs to attend to, but Castiel can think of nothing but the way he wants to kiss Dean speechless. He thinks of how he'd do it. He thinks he could.

Dean's mouth moves: "Are you hit?" His voice is slow, distracted, like

he's pulling the words up from a place deep buried. Castiel watches him form the vowels and consonants, teeth and tongue. Teeth and tongue. It is only when he drags his gaze back up Dean's eyes that Castiel realises the extent to which he has unconsciously leaned forwards, further into Dean's space until they are breathing the same air.

Dean is looking at Castiel's mouth.

Castiel says, at last, "No."

That one word, short as it is, seems to jar Dean back into reality – maybe it's the effect of watching Castiel speak, his mouth no longer an open and waiting thing, but something that belongs to a person, his superior, his commanding officer, or maybe it's the realisation that Castiel is unhurt. Either way, Dean jerks away from Castiel as though burned.

He blinks several times, seems to shake himself, and he lets out a breath that is ragged and shaky. "I have to go," he says, and then adds, "Sir," seemingly as an afterthought. He stumbles several steps away backwards, and then turns, and nearly trips in his haste to get back into the fold.

Castiel drags in a deep breath, steadying himself. He rubs a hand along one side of his face. The perimeter for one-platoon is broken; they've lost two machine-gunners. They need to get reinforcements from one of the other platoons.

Somehow, against all odds, he makes it across even with the Germans' bullets at his back and the whistle of mortars overhead. He weaves through the tattered hedgerows, broken where artillery and fire has torn great holes in it, and he sprints up the field towards two-platoon's command post.

He skids and stumbles between shell-scrapings as he makes his way through the platoon, and he finds Inias tucked into a shell-scraping of his own, a thin trickle of blood coming down from an injury on his forehead.

"One-platoon running low on troops," Castiel shouts across the drumming of Panzer shells as they hit the earth, and he drops down to kneel beside Inias. "Lost two machine-gunners – I need you to send some across to hold the perimeter!"

Inias gives a short nod and twists on his heel. "Sergeant Garrigan!"

Castiel doesn't wait around to hear him pass the order on; he just grabs hold of Inias' shoulder, a quick squeeze of reassurance that they're going to be fine, and then he takes off again to hold the line.

18th July, 1945

By the following morning, things seem to be looking up. Major Isaacs calls in an air-strike on the Panzer tanks the previous evening, although not before the 2nd Battalion has sustained heavy losses from the shelling. Then, when Charlie Company pushes forwards to check the tanks for survivors, they find an ammo dump which they bring back to the Battalion to be shared among the men so they stand in better stead in the firefights to come. A lot of men are saying – in Baker, at least – that having bluffed through a day and a night like that, they're not sure they'll need ammunition for the rest of the war. Castiel's not so sure; he definitely feels happier when the rifle that he turns on the enemy is actually loaded.

One of the 116th Regiment's other battalions open up a lifeline to the

isolated units, and they even manage to hold it open in spite of German attempts to cut them off again. Supplies come in, of both ammunition and rations, and Dean can finally get his casualties carted off back to the regimental aid station for further care.

A German patrol pushed through the American lines on the Dog Company side of their position early last night to test their defences, but since then there has been no other counter-attack – the air-strike probably had a hand in deterring the German infantry as well as their heavy artillery forces.

Since the life-line between battalions was opened, a good part of Castiel's men have disappeared; soldiers who have been struggling under heavy fire are allowed to swap out for a brief respite, and casualties are able to report to the aid station for assistance.

Castiel hasn't seen Dean in hours. He remembers a glimpse of him on the other side of the front, down past four-platoon's mortar-men – remembers the dim, distant sound of his laugh and the sight of him shoving playing at Sergeant Lafitte as he moves between the men to check on morale. Aside from that, Castiel hasn't seen him since they crossed paths the previous day.

This is how the day goes.

According to very infrequent radio updates from regimental HQ, the 115th push up towards Martinville and La Planche in an attempt to get access to the cut-off battalions of the 116th; the other regiments are closing in around the other side of Saint Lo.

Baker Company hold, and they hold, in spite of their low resources and their even lower morale – more than twenty-four hours on permanent stand-to will do that to you. In spite of the enemy bombardments, Castiel is finally beginning to feel like they might get out of this in one piece.

Radio comms come in the afternoon to inform the company commanding officers of the 116th, Castiel included, that the Division's 29th Reconnaissance Troop have officially broken through to the main objective – one large square by the cemetery at the three-way crossroads uniting the highways from Bayeux, Couvains, and Isigny. They are in the city. They are taking back Saint Lo.

American military fighter-planes roar overhead to unleash fire on the remaining German positions, and one by one, the regiments move in. Castiel watches the horizon for any sight of enemy troops still holding the position that has been endlessly harassing them for the past three days, unwilling to give any order to adjust his company until he is one-hundred per cent sure – and then, suddenly, it is time.

They pack up what little gear they have and they march down the Bayeux highway for what rubble is left of the liberated city. Squads are assigned to accompany tanks and heavy anti-tank vehicles to hold defensive positions around the city in case of any counter-attack.

By nineteen-hundred hours that evening, men are spilling down the streets, turning their rifles into doorways and gardens to clear out all remaining occupied forces, and they push deep into the heart until Saint Lo is secure.

Baker Company are shepherded by regimental staff into the southern part of the city, where they will bed down and recuperate until they are given further instructions. It isn't exactly cushy living, as most of the buildings have been torn down and there is always the risk of straggler German soldiers or worse, of explosives left behind as a last gift to the Allied soldiers, but it's a great deal more comfortable than the fields in which they'd lived for the past few days. Inias is ecstatic at the idea of simply having a roof over his head.

It's hard to believe that it's over. Of course, they still have to hold

Saint Lo against any German offensive that might try to take the city back, until 2nd Battalion HQ can move up heavier forces to occupy it, but that shouldn't be too bad – for the most part, it seems that the opposition has been squashed, and Castiel doesn't suppose that anything too devastating can come out of the woodwork now. The entirety of the 116th is holed up in the southern districts of Saint Lo, with the 115th holding the eastern areas that had been most heavily defended, and the 175th looking out for everybody with heavy artillery locked and loaded for instantaneous defense if the need should arise.

It is, for the most part, over. Castiel is sure that within the next week Baker Company will be moving out towards the next big assault, but for now things are relatively tranquil.

Now he just had to finish up on paperwork. The company's executive officer, Lieutenant Shurley, will do most of the grunt work on a typewriter for him, but he needs a foundation to build on, especially as his position at Battalion headquarters put him forever two steps behind the rest of the company and so is largely oblivious of the daily lives of Baker soldiers. Casualty reports, fatality reports, information regarding the company's day-to-day progress through the attack – and a report to the battalion commander detailing his experience of being cut off from the rest of the regiment so that higher-ups can decide what to do with the commander in question.

It's a lot of work, but Castiel isn't too aggravated by it for now. He's stationed in a building with real walls and a real ceiling, he has a hot coffee in his mug, and later in the evening, he and the rest of Baker Company will head over towards HQ to get actual hot food. He recognises these things as luxuries now, and he is glad of them, even if it means a little bit of paperwork.

He settles down at the impromptu desk that Corporals Harvelle and Mills set up for him – a three-legged wooden char positioned by a wide plank of wood over two empty barrels – and organises his paperwork into piles according to urgency of completion. He takes a mouthful of coffee, since he gets the feeling that he's going to be here

for a while, and with his ink pen in hand, he gets to business.

Not long after he has settled into the latest report, there comes a tentative knock at the door from the other side of the room.

“Granted,” Castiel calls, pre-empting the next move from whoever it is and getting ahead before they can request permission to enter. He’s too tired for formalities.

Slow footsteps trace their way inside, and as there is a momentary pause in which the newcomer stands in the doorway and says nothing, Castiel looks up to see who it is. He is surprised to see Dean Winchester.

Castiel frowns. He would never have taken Dean for the hesitant-knocking, silent-entry type of NCO. Actually, he knows for a fact that Dean usually functions more along the lines of barging in without permission and instantly setting up loud, cheerful conversation into which he may or may not have been ever invited.

“Winchester,” Castiel says, setting down his pen in his inkpot. “Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, alright, sir,” Dean replies - somewhat too hurriedly, it could be said – and then looks away with a faint tinge of colour to his jaw and ears, as though even he can see that the haste of his speech draws attention to the lie. His eyes track across the walls and over the ceiling. “Yeah, I was just, uh. I wanted to come see how you were doing.”

Castiel raises his eyebrows. “Fine, thank you,” he says, almost amused by just how out of character this visit is for Dean.

“Right.” Dean gives a short nod. “You don’t need anything – coffee, a light…? Uhh, maybe some more ink?”

“Winchester, I do appreciate your concern, but I have administrative men to help with such problems. It isn’t usually the priority of medics,” he adds, pointedly, in the hope that maybe this will steer Dean around towards getting at what he really wants.

With that, he pushes his chair back and stands, with the intention of perusing some of his maps to ensure that he knows the surrounding terrain – just in case they are required to move out abruptly and without a great deal of briefing, as is occasionally the wont of Battalion HQ; he doesn’t want to caught off-guard.

However, as soon as he gets to his feet, Dean jerks slightly where he stands – almost flinches. Dean takes a quick step back, with a suddenness that can only be subconscious, and then as though to mask the weirdness of his behaviour, he shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Left to right, and back again. It doesn’t make him look at more at ease.

“Are you sure you don’t need anything?” Castiel comments as he crosses the room towards where he has laid out his maps. He glances over his shoulder back at Dean. “A sedative, perhaps?”

“No, sir – well. Sort of. I mean…” Dean takes a deep breath. “Sir... can I ask you a question?”

Castiel turns halfway to look at him, and sees him continuing to move his weight, left to right, left to right, and running his teeth over his lip. His fingers twitch and clench at his sides. He lifts one hand to shove backwards through his hair, then lets it sit at the back of his head, rubbing slightly at the nape of his neck like a gesture of self-comfort.

Castiel's never seen him like this before. Nervous.

"Of course. What's wrong?"

"But—" Dean cuts himself off, swallowing hard. "But you have to promise to answer like a person... instead of like an officer."

A frown pulls down between Castiel's eyebrows. He doesn't entirely understand what's happening, but if Dean – cool, laid-back and generally arrogant Dean - is all worked up, and if it's important enough that he's unsettled, then it probably warrants Castiel's complete focus. "Okay." He sets down the maps in his hands and turns to give Dean his full attention. "What is it?"

Dean hesitates. He presses his lips tight together and simply stands there for a few seconds as though gathering courage before he inhales slowly through his nose, inflating, and then pushes forward. "Are you – sexually attracted to me?"

Like a solid-fist punch to the gut, Castiel is hit with the strangest sensation that the entire universe has suddenly and spontaneously collapsed around him. He is frozen, completely speechless. For what seems like a lifetime, he just stands there, mouth slightly open in sheer shock.

When he remembers how to speak, the only thing he can think to say is, "Excuse me?", harsh and incredulous.

"No, no, no," Dean is suddenly saying, shaking his head, but there's poorly veiled desperation rough in his tone, and he's stepping closer. "You're not allowed to pull that disapproving-officer shit on me, you promised – you don't get to do that—"

“I think you should leave,” Castiel says, because his head is spinning and he’s a hair-trigger away from doing something very stupid and extremely irresponsible.

He can hear his pulse, deafening, as it rings around and around his skull; his mouth dries up and his throat constricts until he can barely breathe. He takes a blind step backwards, out of the danger zone – except there is no danger zone because nothing is safe anymore, not with the way Dean is advancing, eyes fixed and relentless, and Castiel repeats it, dumbly, *I think you should leave,* because if Dean doesn’t leave, then Castiel doesn’t know what’s going to happen but he’s not sure how well he can control himself.

Dean takes another step towards him. Castiel’s back hits the wall.

“Tell me the truth.”

Dean is insistent, his voice low, and something about that nearly takes Castiel’s legs out from underneath him because it’s so private, intimateeven, and with Dean so close to him, he can just imagine Dean talking low and filthy in his ear— and god, Castiel needs to answer him, needs to say something, but his mind has gone utterly blank. He’s just standing there, back against the wall, breathing ragged and trying to remember how to string together any sentence that sounds like *I don’t want to fuck you* because all he can think is Jesus, *Jesus,* he wants to— and then Dean kisses him hard.

Any attempt that Castiel was going to make to try and save himself is completely gone because he melts against Dean, every inch of his body curving to meet every inch of Dean’s until they’re pressed flat together from chest to pelvis, Dean shoving Castiel back against the wall, Castiel surrendering.

Dean kisses recklessly, lips hot and dry, and Castiel opens his mouth to let him in, kissing back like he could take every part of him and burn it to the ground. Castiel's blood is screaming under his skin, a thunderous pounding in his ears, between his legs where he can feel Dean leaning heavily against him, and he's breathless with the heady rush of it, hitching broken gasps against Dean's mouth. He tastes of salt and rust and stale D-ration bars, and it's harsh and unromantic, but it's *Dean* – broad shoulders, bowlegs, green eyes – and their tongues are a hot, wet slide together; Castiel is already half-hard in his combats and all he wants to do is roll his hips up into Dean's until they're both shaking.

It's only when Castiel's hands come up and are fisting into the material of Dean's combat jacket that he realises what he's actually doing. His blood runs instantly ice-cold – he's kissing a colleague – and he freezes – he's kissing his *subordinate* – and he breaks away from the kiss, using the hands curled into Dean's clothes to shove him away as hard as he can.

Dean stumbles backwards, completely caught off-balance, and looks up to meet Castiel's eyes like a deer in headlights. His cheeks are flushed, his pupils wide and dark, and his mouth is swollen. Seeing him like that, Castiel's hands itch to grab him and pull him back in, but he can't. He *can't.*

For several seconds, they just stare at each other, breathing heavily. Then Castiel says, "Get out."

Dean doesn't answer. He certainly doesn't leave. He stares straight at Castiel, his expression unreadable, and slowly, he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, almost like he's disgusted to find the damp traces of what just happened.

Castiel's jaw tightens. "That's an order, *sergeant.*"

At last, Dean jerks his head in a curt nod. He looks past Castiel for a second, at the wall to the side of him, and lets his breath out in one long, shaky exhalation. Then, without a second's further delay, he turns and he walks out.

The door slams behind him, and Dean is gone. Castiel stays completely still, back up against the wall, and as he stares after Dean, breath rough in his chest, he realises that he's trembling.

Chapter 7: Vire

Chapter Notes

I just want to say at the start here that there's some content in this chapter that could potentially be seen as dub-con and victim-blame-y, and I wanted to warn for that. (SPOILERS: within the context, it's more like 'here are some super repressed queer boys blaming each other for the fact that they want to bang so that they don't have to face how queer they are', but there's some aspects of you-were-asking-for-it, you-made-me-do-this type thing that could be triggering for people, so!! I just wanted to warn people.)

VIRE

19th July, 1944

Dear Sam,

You're gonna kill me. Jesus, I fucked up so bad. I'm so dead, I don't know what to do. I can't tell you what happened in a letter but it probably won't matter because I'll most likely be home real soon to tell you in person because at the moment I think it's a 100 percent likelihood that I'm gonna get fired and sent right back to Lawrence.

Fuck, Sammy. I did something really stupid, and I don't know why I did it, only I guess it seemed like a good idea at the time, and now I've royally pissed off Novak – like, not even pissed off. He probably wants me dead? I don't know how to explain it, and I'm sorry, 'cause this is just the vaguest letter I've ever written and you're gonna think I'm such an asshole being so confusing and unclear, but I can't say it out loud but I gotta say it to someone, and I sure as hell can't tell anyone else. I don't know what to do, Sammy, I'm so. I really fucked it up this time.

I gotta try and fix this somehow. I don't know how but… shit. Either I'll see you in Lawrence in a couple weeks or – fuck knows. Shit, Sam. I'll talk to

you soon.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

22nd July, 1944

Castiel is going to lose his job, that much is certain. An officer doesn't get to just tongue-fuck his senior medic without severe repercussions, he knows that. He has yet to figure out whether the offense is bad enough to have him lined up and shot.

The worst part is that Castiel doesn't even know what to do about it. Should he turn Dean in to his superiors? Should he turn *himself* in to his superiors? Should he give Dean some kind of stern dress-down but ultimately forgive him his transgressions, or should he just pretend it never happened? He has no idea how to respond to the situation – of course, he'd imagined it thousands of times when he was bored and alone and strung so tight he felt he was due to vibrate out of his skin, but never thought it would actually happen.

If not handled carefully, any one of these options could turn out disastrous – and then, of course, there is a more dangerous idea still. It plays constantly at the edge of the mind, as though he thinks that maybe if he lets the notion creep up on him when he isn't paying attention, then he can claim he didn't really want it. He *doesn't* really want it – the very idea is ludicrous.

Castiel is not going to start something up with Dean Winchester.

That's not to suggest, anyway, that Castiel spends a lot of time thinking about it, because he doesn't. He's too busy for any such distractions – he has paperwork piling to be completed for the battalion executive officers, and he has company NCOs on his back about the wellbeing of the men, the necessity of equipment replacement and ammunition replenishments. In fact, the idea that he has any free time at all in which to be thinking about the weight of Dean's body, his hands curled tight into Castiel's clothes, the heat of his mouth – is completely ludicrous.

Unfortunately, Dean does not seem to share that level of preoccupation – while for a few days he does lie low, he is within the week back to bouncing around in Castiel's space, interrupting his work and disturbing his peace of mind. If anything, he is worse now, because he comes over with a frantic look in his eyes and his mouth a tight line, almost frightened, and Castiel knows that he wants to talk about it.

He is there in company briefings, as he strains to make eye contact, and he weaves his way through the maze of disgruntled soldiers to try and find Castiel in any given moment.

Castiel stands with Lieutenant Virgil over their respective maps and intel in an attempt to decipher possible upcoming manoeuvers of the 29th Division, but their concentration is broken by a clumsy knock on the doorjamb, and in Dean comes.

Castiel barely spares him a glance. He doesn't speak to acknowledge him.

"Sir, I've got some message here for you from Charlie Company medics," he says, and Castiel can hear from the shift of his weight from one foot to the other that he is already uneasy. With faltering steps, he crosses the room towards Castiel, and then he hands him a

sheaf of somewhat disorganised papers.

"Thank you," Castiel says, but as he takes the report, he determinedly doesn't look at Dean. For some unfathomable reason, however, Dean makes no move to leave, and so Castiel glances at him, his eyes hard. "That'll be all, sergeant," he clarifies, tone pointed so that Dean cannot misunderstand the dismissal.

Dean shifts uncomfortably from one foot to the other, his gaze darting quickly from place to place. "Well, sir, actually, I wanted to—"

"That'll be all, sergeant," Castiel repeats, more emphatically this time. "I'm trying to talk to Lieutenant Hester. I trust you don't need help finding the door?" He then turns slightly so that Dean is shown the back of Castiel's shoulder.

There is a beat where all is quiet, and then, at last – alongside a short frustrated huff that Castiel deigns to ignore – there is the sound of Dean's feet as he leaves.

Hester, who was rifling through a map during the brief interlude, now lifts his eyes to meet Castiel's with a frown. "What was that about?"

"No idea. Now, what were you saying?"

28th July, 1944

To the great disappointment of the men, Baker Company is not allowed anything like the rest that they were dreaming of. They're

stationed in and around Saint Lo for a few days, at least – replenishing supplies, letting the man get their strength back as well as letting the rest of the Division catch up with the assaulting front – but that's it. Time to go.

The men squabble and jibe and sing passive-aggressive songs about what a joy it is to go to war, but they pack up their kit and get ready to move out southwards. As Fitzgerald loudly remarks, it's not as though they have a choice.

It's a miserable morning, the sky grey and heavy with rain, and Castiel feels damp and cold to his core. It is not a day for Castiel's patience to be tried, and yet Dean is still trying to get Castiel to communicate with him.

"First Sergeant Masters, I want everyone in formation with all their gear by the square in five minutes," Castiel calls out on his way between command posts. "We should be ready to go by now."

"Yes, sir."

"And if anyone sees Sergeant Milligan, tell him I need him."

Someone wolf-whistles, but the offender is quickly covered by the scattered laughter of other men, and as it is, Castiel is too tired to be bothered with disciplining soldiers over a stupid whistle. As he walks, one of the new replacement privates comes up beside him, jogging to keep up.

"Sorry, sir, hate to bother you – Private Rosen, sir, Benji Rosen? I spoke to you yesterday about a change of webbing – I was just wondering if you knew anything further about—"

“Alright, private, listen closely,” Castiel says, without breaking pace. “You’ll find Lieutenant Wallace at Company CP with some of the battalion staff. Get him to direct you to XO Shurley. Report to Shurley and he should be able to get you some better webbing. You might not get it until we reach our next position, but you will get it – and hurry. We’re moving out in five.”

“Thank you, sir!”

And then, of course, there is Dean, ever fixed in Castiel’s vicinity like a piece of gum stuck to his boot. “Uh, sir, can I talk to you for a second —”

“Not now, Winchester.” Not ever, Castiel thinks.

“But sir, I really, really need to—”

“I said, not now, sergeant!” Castiel says sharply, and throws a glare over his shoulder. He tries to look through the flash of hurt on Dean’s face, pretend that he doesn’t see it, and he keeps walking.

They’re on the road to Vire by on-nine-forty-five in a relentless drizzle that soaks through Castiel’s combats and trickles down into his socks. He considers with some regret that the blister on his heel was just starting to heal, with the time to rest in Saint Lo; he can already feel it beginning to rub again.

Inias walks a platoon ahead, and Castiel can hear him keeping spirits up with idle chatter. From the slopes of their shoulders, Castiel can tell the men are disheartened; it must seem to them – as it seems to him – that they never get a break, that they just walk and they fight

and they sleep, and then they wake up in the morning stiff and tired only to walk and fight again.

They take the cross-country route through Baudre, startling a couple farmhands working in the rain, and they capture a small German stronghold when they cross the Vire River – a mercifully easy undertaking that results in no casualty more devastating than Garth Fitzgerald's broken finger when he shuts it in a door while clearing a barn.

Some hours later, Baker Company lay down an ambush along the main supply route to Saint-Romphaire, as word comes in from the Battalion S-2 that there is intelligence that the 2nd Battalion could be followed by a German company positioned west of La-Mancelliere-sur-Vire, who plan to attack in the night when they set up a harbour area. By this point, the drizzle has turned to driving rain, and with the onset of evening, the temperature is slowly dropping lower and lower, until the July twilight feels like November.

The three infantry platoons are stretched out along a half mile of road, with a few squads guarding their flanks, and the light artillery platoon at the rear to cover the road and the nearby countryside. One by one they file into position and lay down in the dirt, rifles propped into shoulders, machine-guns snapping into their tripods ready to wait.

Castiel took to one knee and almost immediately felt the damp of the ground soak through his combat pants, and he watched his soldiers wince as they got into the position amongst wet leaves and puddles of rainwater collecting in the grass. This was going to be an unpleasant couple of hours.

One hour at most, he thought – two and a half maximum, if they were unlikely and something went wrong with the intelligence.

At three hours and forty minutes, there is a clap of thunder, and lightning momentarily illuminates the dark. In the brief flash of light, Castiel can see the man nearest to him – Benny Lafitte, he guesses, from the bulk of him – leaving his rifle in the dirt while he frantically tries to rub warmth back into his hands. Beside him, Corporal Harvelle passes over a pair of visibly sodden gloves: it seems that they're sharing. Castiel lets out a long, slow breath, and wonders how long this can go on before it becomes ridiculous.

Castiel shifts from one knee to the other, taking a moment to stretch out his cramped leg. Even though he knows that the likelihood of the enemy filing through at the precise moment he stands up to stretch is slim at best, Castiel still doesn't want to risk it. He settles for curling and uncurling his toes inside his boots, with the thought that perhaps pure force of will can calm his pins-and-needles.

A shadow comes creeping along the line, bent almost double to keep out of sight from any eyes in the distance – even though it is pitch-dark, and raining, and chilly enough that there are the beginnings of a fog rising.

"That you, Lieutenant Novak?" Inias' voice comes.

"Evening, Inias," Castiel says, once he's close enough that he can speak in a whisper. His voice is hoarse from disuse, and he can feel a cough tickling at the back of his throat. He hopes he isn't about to get a chest cold from this weather.

Inias settles in to crouch beside Castiel. His boots squelch in the mud. "Hi. Thought I'd come and visit you, courtesy of two-platoon. See if the weather's any better up this end of the line."

Castiel squints up at the sky, one eye closed to the rain. "Bright sunny day here, as you can see."

Through the gloom, Castiel can see Inias grimace. “Sounds about right. So how are you doing?”

“About the same as everyone else, I think.”

Inias gives a dark laugh. “So damp, cold, and miserable, then.”

Castiel doesn’t answer that. He doesn’t like to complain, even if it is only to Inias; he needs to be the backbone of this company.

Inias seems to realise with Castiel’s silence that he is not going to surrender to humour and camaraderie, and he turns to look at him with hesitance. “Cas,” he says. “We’ve been here for nearly four hours.”

Castiel tries to conceal his irritation, not wanting to take it out on what is likely his only friend. Castiel can’t help that they’re stuck out here on bullshit orders, and even so, he can’t do anything about it, and Inias must know that Castiel hates it as much as he does. Castiel reminds himself that it’s not illegal to express doubt, but in spite of himself, he feels the harsh words of denial spilling out of his mouth unbidden. “I know,” he says, voice flat. “Like every man here, I do have a watch.”

“Are we sure the intel is solid?” Inias asks.

“We were briefed by battalion staff, and to their knowledge, the intelligence is good. I have no reason to believe otherwise. I have faith in their abilities.”

Inias sighs. “Cas, I’m not an NCO, here.”

There is a long moment where neither of them speak, but just stare through the rain pelting the trees and plinking onto the helmets of the men stretched out in the dirt. Then Castiel says, “I don’t know what you want from me.”

Inias looks over.

“Alright, so the intelligence is wrong. What am I supposed to do about that?”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Orders are orders. We’re not going anywhere.”

Inias clucks his tongue against his teeth. He doesn’t argue. He takes another few seconds before he says, almost to himself, “Someone’s going to get pneumonia out here.”

“So get among them,” Castiel says. “Make them laugh, listen to their complaints and grievances – we owe them that much. It won’t change the situation, but it’ll make them feel better.” Then he glances over, and in a softer voice, one that is small and quiet as his doubts, he adds, “I’m sure one of the other companies will be relieving us soon.”

Inias nods. “Yeah, sure thing.” For a moment he hesitates, as though he’s not sure whether he should hang around for more support, but he seems to realise that Castiel is incorrigible, and so he hauls himself to his feet. He disappears into the dark and the sheets of cold rain that pelt the earth and puddle.

Castiel lets out a long, slow breath. He counts to ten. Another hour, he decides. Another hour, and he will radio in to battalion HQ to inform them of the situation. He will politely request permission to move off towards their next position or to set up a harbour area, and he feels anxiety spike in his chest at the mere thought of suggesting something that might second-guess previous commands. He wrings his hands together. He will explain that they have been here for four hours – five, by that point – and that the men are cold and wet and tired, and that to keep them out here longer would be a detriment to their ability to perform in following days. That's what he will say.

He touches the cold crucifix underneath his combat shirt, and he recites in his head the words his mother taught him. *Dear Lord, I come to you as I am – tired, confused, demoralised. Lift me up, Lord. Strengthen me with your Holy Spirit and bless me with your graces to carry on. I feel my crosses are too heavy to carry. I surrender them to You. I surrender.*

He counts to ten again. And again.

30th July, 1944

Just north of the Bures-les-Monts, there are three German strongholds in close enough proximity to one another that they can each simultaneously zero artillery fire on Baker Company's advance and push them back. Saying that it's difficult to get close enough to assault any of the positions from any angle is an understatement.

It's been many days since they were in contact with the rest of the Battalion to get ammunition replenished, and so they don't have enough mortars to make anywhere near the impact needed to take out the guns, and while firing from afar will do nothing, trying to get closer will just get them all killed.

Castiel isn't happy, but there's nothing they can do except retreat out of range, radio in for artillery support and reinforcements from another company, and wait. If any German infantry come their way for a counter-attack, then that's at least something they can deal with, but for now they head back deeper into the trees and dig shell-scrapings.

He walks between the platoons to check that everyone is alright and to briefly speak to NCOs about what action should be taken if there is a counter-attack. All through the company there is a general buzz of apprehension and the jittery desire to just get it over with; Castiel knows how they feel. He drops into a crouch, sitting back on his heels, and digs in his combat jacket for his cigarette tin.

"Hey, can I get a light, please, sir?" Johnny Mills comes up to ask once Castiel's lit up. "Only I dropped mine somewhere around Troisgots." He says it like troh-goats, but his confidence in the pronunciation is such that Castiel doesn't have the heart to tell him otherwise.

Castiel passes the lighter over.

Mills sucks at his cigarette until it catches and tosses the lighter back. He exhales pale smoke. "So how're you feeling about those positions, then?"

"They shouldn't be a problem as long as we can get some heavy artillery on our side," Castiel says. "We just need to wait."

"You're a man after my own heart," Mills says with a short laugh. "I saw those guns, I swear, some pee leaked out."

Nearby, Joe Harvelle scoffs. "You would. Lieutenant's not afraid of anything." He winks at Castiel. "Right, sir?"

“Not true,” Castiel says around his cigarette. “I felt fear as a child. Once.”

Mills shakes his head disparagingly while Harvelle bursts out laughing, and Castiel can even feel the beginnings of a smile creeping up on him when he hears a familiar voice just behind him.

Dean chips in something about how screwed they’d all be without their fearless leader – Castiel very deliberately is not listening to him – and Castiel gets quickly up to his feet. He should have seen this danger when he struck up casual conversation with two of Dean’s closest friends within the company, and while he is kicking himself now, it’s too late to do anything except to extract himself from them immediately. He stubs out his cigarette against his boot and stows it back in his tin. He then removes his helmet to push a hand back through his hair, buying time while he searches for an excuse, and announces, “I’m going to take a walk. Another quick recon of the area – to see there are any angles we missed. Corporals, please inform Lieutenant Virgil as such.”

He has barely finished speaking when, out of the control of his eye, he can see Dean scrambling after him, entrenching tool clattering to the ground, and Castiel realises he has made a mistake. He can’t take back his decision now – it will look strange and suspicious to the men, and so there is nothing to do but look away from Dean, who stoops quickly to retrieve his fallen helmet, readjusting it with his free hand as it swings loosely over his head.

“Sir,” Dean calls, trying to organise his equipment so that he can move. “Permission to come with you?”

Castiel doesn’t even look at him. “Denied.” He walks away. He moves hastily towards the edge of the front line, distantly aware that he needs to get away fast, because the risk of confrontation in front of his

men grows stronger with every moment that Dean pursues him. He can already feel his breath coming short with panic; he sets his jaw against the feeling, and keeps going.

Dean, however, is relentless; Castiel can hear him stumbling to follow, still clanking as he tries to stow his tools. “Please, lieutenant, I’d like to talk to you about something—”

“I don’t think we could possibly have anything to talk about, sergeant.”

“I’d have to disagree with you there, sir!”

Castiel doesn’t so much as break pace. He heads off in the direction that they originally patrolled in from, pausing briefly to inform the man on sentry that he’s leaving the harbour area, and begins weaving his way carefully through the trees. He can hear Dean inelegantly crashing through the undergrowth behind him, and rolls his eyes. Jesus fucking Christ, the kid just can’t leave well enough alone.

“Wait,” Dean is calling breathlessly, running now, if the sound of his footsteps is anything to go by; Castiel lengthens his strides, walks a little faster. “Please – *wait*—”

“Sergeant, I don’t have a damn thing to say to you,” Castiel says coldly as he hears Dean settling into a fast walk now, and Castiel won’t look over, but he knows that Dean is now more or less caught up.

“Please—”

Christ, he can’t be dealing with this; this is so wildly beyond what

Castiel needs to worry about on top of everything else, on top of the commanding the movements of a whole company, being responsible for the lives of some hundred-odd men, trying to fight a fucking *war*, for god's sake – and yet he can't get it out of his head. The moment when Dean shoved him up against that wall and finally closed the space between them, pushed his tongue deep into his mouth and kissed him breathless, on infinite loop behind his eyes – the shape of his lips pressed to Castiel's, the touch of his tongue, the scrape of his teeth. Castiel shakes his head to clear it, unsuccessfully.

"You need to go back," he says, and lifts a hand to dismiss him without even turning to look at him – but then Dean grabs the fabric of his sleeve and holds him still.

"Just hold up, okay?" Dean says, frustrated. "Please, sir. I'm sorry."

Ripping his arm out of Dean's grip, Castiel turns to face him, his expression set into blank hostility as he waits for Dean to explain himself.

Dean takes a deep breath, "Sir, I'm sorry," he tries again, his brow crumpling anxiously. "Really – I'm not even like that. I'm not a fairy, or whatever, I don't even know what came over me. But I was out of line and I just... I didn't think. I probably breached at least a million and a half codes of conduct and you could probably have me court-martialled but I'm sorry, I am. I didn't mean to—"

"Didn't mean to what, exactly?" Castiel snaps, and he was going to be professional about this, take Dean's apology on board like the responsible officer he's supposed to be, except that his blood is boiling and none of this was ever supposed to happen and Castiel was getting on just fine repressing who he is until Dean fucking Winchester came along with his hands and his shoulders and his fucking sinful mouth and it just isn't fair. The words are tumbling out of his mouth unchecked, built on raw anger and maybe just a little of that aching want already beating low in his stomach, always pounding there every

time he so much as looks at Dean. “Didn’t mean to expose me as a goddamn queer, is that it?” he’s challenging, his voice dropping now to a hoarse whisper. “Didn’t mean to ruin my career, what? Didn’t mean to risk us both getting fired or demoted or arrested - didn’t mean to jeopardise this whole fucking military operation because I can’t think about a damn thing else?”

“And how do you think I feel?” Dean comes back suddenly, remorseless in the wake of Castiel’s accidental admission to wanting it. His jaw is a tight line of irritation, muscle pulsing at the hinge. “I didn’t want this! You put this on me!”

It’s so unexpected for a second Castiel can barely process what’s been said. “What?”

“All this is your fault – you started it!” Dean says angrily, and he finally lets go of Castiel’s arm, pushing it away from him as though he’s disgusted to have touched it. He looks up to see Castiel staring incredulously at him, and his face screws up. “Come on, you were about as subtle as a goddamn stick of comp-B.”

Humiliated at having been caught, Castiel can feel heat searing up into his neck and ears. “You’re full of shit, Winchester,” he bites out, and he’s shaking his head, eyes hard. “You wanted that attention, don’t tell me otherwise.” He steps closer, lips pressed together into an angry line, and Dean’s eyes flicker down to them – only for a split-second, but it’s enough. “Every time I was eating you up with my eyes you were loving it.”

“Bullshit.”

“All those winks and smiles and suggestive comments,” Castiel lists, his voice low and threatening. Another step closer, and this time, Dean doesn’t step back. “Every time you asked me to dance, every

time you pretended to weigh me up for the pretty girls like I was a goddamn piece of meat—”

“All this coming from the guy who asked to suck my dick in *French*,” Dean snaps, not backing down.

“And, Christ, the way you reacted – is this what you wanted, then? To ruin me? Is this what you wanted?” Castiel demands, and all of a sudden he just snaps – takes two handfuls of the front of Dean’s jacket, hauls him forwards, and crushes their mouths together. Castiel doesn’t do it to be romantic, or sexy – he means it like an attack – and he gets Dean’s mouth open, licks roughly inside. He doesn’t let himself think about all the things wanted – he just takes it, lifts one hand to curl around the back of Dean’s head – knocks his helmet out of the way, lets it clatter to the sidewalk as loud as anything, but at that moment, he couldn’t give a damn.

He fists his fingers tight enough into Dean’s hair that Dean hitches some broken sound into Castiel’s mouth before Castiel uses the grip to yank Dean’s head back, and he gives them just about enough space to snatch a single breath of each other’s air, and he says, “Is this what you fucking wanted?”

Dean doesn’t answer; Castiel doesn’t give him time to. He uses the hand in the back of Dean’s hair as leverage to drag him in closer, to press in harder, so that the kiss is bruising, all teeth, and then Castiel pulls back just far enough to give him room to shove Dean backwards, stumbling, until his back is up against the alleyway wall. Castiel comes after him, pressing him flat to the bricks so that their bodies are flush, one long trembling line, and Castiel can feel Dean through his combat pants, the length of him hard against Castiel’s hip.

Castiel hardly has room for a spare thought, his head spinning and dizzy, his blood a heavy, pulsing roar inside his skull and underneath his skin with every moment that he snags Dean’s mouth, bites into his lower lip, pushes his tongue inside to lick over the roof of his mouth –

but dimly, in the background, he realises that this is happening. This is real. Dean likes men, and he is hard in his combat pants, and they are touching one another in a back alley in Saint Lo with a ferocity that burns red-hot in the pit of Castiel's stomach and leaves him so aroused he can't focus for a second on anything except Dean – the slick heat of his open mouth, his shaking hands where they clench into the fabric of Castiel's combat jacket like he isn't sure whether he's allowed to touch, the low groan he makes in the back of his throat like he's coming apart already when Castiel rocks his hips hard against Dean's.

"Is this what you wanted?" Castiel growls into Dean's mouth, and he lowers his hands to Dean's hips, digs a thumb into each hipbone to pull him close, and rolls against him so that they slide together – slowly, at first, and then with more urgency. "Is this—" he pants, and he pushes a leg between Dean's thigh, up tight against his balls, and moves against him in a sharp, sudden roll, "—what you wanted?", and Dean gasps out loud, his head falling back against the wall. He is soft, compliant, in Castiel's care; his hips pitch in desperate, unconscious jerks, trying to get closer, but held fast by Castiel's steady hands.

Dean lets out a groan that has Castiel flushing all over with heat, and god, all he wants to do is kiss Dean until he breaks, he wants to let Dean handle him roughly, tear at his body and fuck him until he's shaking – and Castiel decides, fuck it, they're ruined already – so Castiel reaches down and yanks open the button and zipper of Dean's combat pants. He shoves the material unceremoniously to one side, and although Dean gasps out loud – maybe in surprise, maybe at the cold – he doesn't say anything. He just draws his head back far enough that he can break the kiss and look Castiel in the eye.

That's it – Dean just... looks at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, breathing hard – and Castiel looks away. He doesn't need to look at Dean; he doesn't have to see the pink flush of want across his face, or the way his eyes turn heavy with lust, or the colour of his mouth when it's bitten and bruised. Castiel doesn't need to feel anything for him. He drops to his knees.

Dean's cock is maybe a little shorter than Castiel's own, a little thicker, flushed darkly pink at the head, and there are freckles on his hips, and Dean bites back a shaky moan when Castiel sucks him in his mouth. He grabs two handfuls of the back of Castiel's jacket, clinging tight like he's the only thing keeping him upright, and he might well be, as Dean trembles and his knees buckle.

Inexperience means that Castiel lacks finesse, his movements awkward, but Dean doesn't seem to notice. He doesn't last long – dimly, in the back of his head, Castiel thinks that Dean must have been waiting for this as long as he was – because Castiel just has to slip his second hand into Dean's pants, push through the fabric, and roll Dean's balls once in the palm of his hand, and then Dean comes with a small whimper, his hips bucking wildly against Castiel, and then he is still.

Castiel stands up, straightening to full height, and he looks at Dean, half-collapsed against the brick wall with his pink, swollen mouth still open and gasping for breath. He wipes his mouth with one thumb.

He is still painfully hard, but he can deal with that later, on his own. He can only take so much time away from the company on a walk before his men would become concerned and possibly send someone after him; he has to get back. Anyway, he has already decided that with this, he is washing his hands clean of Dean. He's had what he wanted now. He's had Dean's mouth and his hands and his body and seen the roughed-up way he looks when he comes, and he is satisfied. Now this whole, exasperating ordeal can be over.

"Zip up your goddamn pants," he says, and he leaves Dean there. This is over, now. They're done.

2nd August, 1944

The company get cut off en-route to Vire by a German battery just south of Campagnolles, tucked away into a small wood atop a sloping hill, and almost before Castiel knows what is happening, the men are diving into the long grass and rapeseed. Rounds come hissing down to tear holes in the earth, and there is the first hungry sound of short-range mortars being fired. Idly, as he lies flat in the dirt, Castiel wonders how it can be that Battalion staff had Baker Company on stand-by for five hours for an ambush that never happened, but had no knowledge of a solid concrete bunker near the main road.

Castiel peels himself upright from the rain-damp soil and settles back onto his feet in a crouch to shout for Lieutenant Virgil, somewhere down the line. “Bring one-platoon around right for a flanking – use the treeline as cover and pepper-pot up from that road, centre-right of axis, one o’clock! Hold until three-platoon are in position and two-platoon are covering.” He twists on the balls of his feet. “Where’s Gallagher?”

Andy Gallagher comes sprinting across and skids to a halt near Castiel, his face smeared with dirt from being too close to a mortar strike. “Here, sir!”

“Radio in to Able Company, let them know that this position is here,” Castiel says quickly, almost not paying attention to what he’s saying as he scans the landscape for tactical advantages. “Get Alistair and four-platoon dropped back to lay down mortar fire just short of the battery – get rid of the visual on us. Clear?”

“Clear, sir,” Gallagher responds, and the words have barely left his mouth before Castiel is up and running.

He sprints for the centre of the company, cursing himself with every footstep that he put himself on the far right, cursing Battalion intel for having no idea about this battery, and his breath comes quick – *they’re*

going to hit me, they're going to hit me – until the fear peaks and he drops onto his shoulder in the dirt out of sight of rifle scopes. He skids, almost rolling a little, and then he crawls up forwards so that he's not lying where the enemy riflemen saw him go down. He's close enough now that he can pull himself up into a crouch, tilt back his head to yell, "Two-platoon suppressive fire. Hester, on me!"

Castiel rocks back on his heels as he draws breath, and as he waits for Virgil to come running, he ducks low and takes a second to survey the fire-fight. He breathes in and out, and he glances either side at the men tangled in the grass and crops of this dishevelled field – on one side, Private Tran, his eyes squinted to see through the scope as he carefully squeezes out shot after shot, five to seven seconds between each round, as trained; Castiel feels a bizarre, unexpected surge of pride watching him, this young and relatively green soldier performing perfectly. He glances the other way, and he meets Dean's eyes.

They don't say anything. Dean has a scratch on one cheek, a scuff of dirt on his chin. He lies with his arms crossed out in front of him as he waits to be called upon for a casualty, and as he looks at Castiel, his mouth twists slightly, teeth playing over his lower lip. Castiel stares back with all the cold indifference he can muster, and as he holds Dean's gaze, he wills himself not to remember the heated flush of pink on Dean's jaw, his open mouth, the desperate clutch of his hands.

Hester lands heavily next to Castiel, jolting him out of his reverie, and Castiel turns sharply around to say, "Lieutenant, take three-platoon up centre-left with smokes and gunners to get the attention off Virgil while two- and four-platoon provide suppressive fire." Then, because the thought of hanging around at the back with the possibility of thinking about Dean more than is healthy, Castiel adds, "I'll be coming."

With a curt nod, Hester sets off back the way he came to inform his NCOs of the plan, and Castiel follows, bent low out of view.

The German fire sounds its angry war-drum, a pounding rhythm to shake up through the bones of every man within ten miles as the gunners tear down and the mortars rain to earth with a sound like thunder. Every crash impacts heavily enough to jar Castiel's legs so that he wobbles and thinks he'll fall, but somehow against all odds he keeps upright. He keeps running.

He and the soldiers of two-platoon hold their weapons across their chest as they sprint, heads ducked low as though they all think that'll keep the Germans from seeing them and cutting them down. There is a small, dull noise, and then up from the ground blooms red smoke, twisting up in spirals into a thick cloud. Castiel barrels through with his eyes half-shut. They veer off to the left through the trees, and he can hear the German gunners switch fire to follow.

"Down," Castiel yells, voice rough over the thunder of mortars tearing up the ground, and distantly he hears Hester echo it further down the line. He throws himself down onto the ragged turf, gritting his teeth against the dull jolt of pain up through his injured shoulder as he lands, and then he rolls, pulls his rifle into his shoulder.

Hester is leading the platoon; he is supporting, he reminds himself, and he lifts the sight to his eye. He squeezes the trigger.

In the distance there are shouts – to move, to get down, to get a medic – but Castiel tries to block it out. He stays low in the grass as bullets ricochet off the trees nearby, pulling off shot after shot, and does his best not to think. He counts the seconds between each blind shot as he fires into the smoke and the noise, and when he comes to reload, he decides it's time.

"Radio!" Castiel shouts, lifting himself slightly off the ground to project his voice, and he twists to one side to try and find the nearest radioman. "Radio – on me!"

Private Abernathy comes stumbling out of the smoke, hands clenched into the straps of his haversack as he runs so as not to let any harm come to the radio, and he drops heavily onto the ground beside Castiel. “Here, sir—”

“Four- and two-platoon switch fire,” Castiel tells him, and lowers his rifle. “One-platoon move up, three are in position – repeat, three are —”

Abernathy relays it into his mouthpiece at high speed, and with faith that the message is being carried, Castiel turns back around. With quick, sharp movements, he snaps a new clip onto his rifle, pulls it back up to peer through the sights.

Castiel fires once, and twice, and then Abernathy jerks backwards hard enough that he nearly knocks Castiel’s elbow out from underneath, and when Castiel looks over to see what’s going on, he finds Abernathy slumped onto his mouthpiece with a thin trail of blood making its way down from a neat hole above his eyebrow.

Swearing under his breath, Castiel reaches out for a handful of clothing and hauls the body over to get at the mouthpiece. He feels blood wet on his cheek when he presses his face to it. “Three-platoon in position, come in—”

The other platoons move up, and the echoing sound of bullets and artillery grows ever more deafening, and when words come through on the radio that one-platoon are in position – Corporal Donald Hanscum temporarily taking on the role of radioman – Castiel and three-platoon haul themselves up onto their feet for the last rush on the battery as Virgil comes around the other side with the right flanking.

Gunfire rings out louder and closer, chattering like bones, until at last there is a hoarse yell from the bunker: “Re-org – re-org.”

Castiel rolls up onto his feet and jogs for the bunker, still ducked low in case there is somehow still danger, and while Hester takes three-platoon down towards the re-org point beyond an aspen tree-line the other side of the main road, Castiel goes to the bunker.

Mortars blew out one concrete wall – collapsing on their Howitzer, thankfully - but there are three German gunners still alive and being processed as prisoners by Corporal Mills. Castiel gives him a grateful nod as he passes, and continues out the other side, taking careful steps over the rubble and the flat, outstretched arm of a fallen German soldier. He's getting better now at not thinking about it.

He navigates through the debris to find where Lieutenant Virgil is debriefing Sergeant Milligan, and upon seeing him, they both turn to update him on the assault. The bunker was weak; the sustained mortar-fire took it out after several hits, and the pressure of having a heavy Howitzer firing inside it probably didn't help. Three prisoners-of-war; six American casualties, but only two fatalities. Castiel tells them about Abernathy, and they fall quiet. None of them speak up about the fact that Battalion intelligence didn't know about the battery, and Castiel does his best not to consider the possibility of further surprises like this one.

They move the bodies of the deceased, tend to the wounded, and move through the re-org point to find a position south of the bunker to set up and wait for contact.

There are not many positions in the local area that are ideal for a company to stay, as there are woods nearby, and there are sheds and farmhouses further in the distance, combined with long expanses of untended crops – any number of places where the enemy could hide, but they need to connect with the other companies before they reach Vire, as well as allowing Battalion staff to catch up with supplies and replacements.

They set up a temporary harbour area around an abandoned farm

house west of a small village named La Houssardiere, and with sentry positions established on the corners and marksmen in the higher windows of the farmhouse, they settle in for the rest of the afternoon and the night to wait for their superiors.

Baker Company lost a lot of men in Saint Lo who have not all yet been replaced, so some platoons are slightly empty, a fact that the 2nd Battalion is still working on repairing. Just as the sun is going down and casting the world in pale greys and blues, Battalion S-1 comes down from the main road with a deuce-and-a-half loaded with ammunition, rations, and a couple of skinny young men clutching rifles.

Castiel comes forwards to greet Major Campbell and Captain Devereux. “Good afternoon, Major, Captain. Any further news on upcoming movements?”

Samuel Campbell eyes Castiel with disdain. Castiel has always had the impression that his surviving D-Day somehow personally offended Campbell, since he had the audacity to replace Milton in the wake of his death, but there’s nothing he can do about that except remain respectful and hope that one day Campbell might respect him the way he respects the other officers.

Seemingly oblivious to the tension between Castiel and Major Campbell, Devereux responds, “We won’t be able to get any more new men to your company before you reach Vire, but after we’ve taken the city, we should have enough coming over to return Baker to proper form.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You should be reaching the outskirts of Vire by tomorrow afternoon, with the rest of the Battalion,” Campbell joins in, almost sounding

bored. “The 121st Engineers’ should be clearing the way as we have intel on mine-fields and obstacles set up by the enemy on the route south-west, so get in touch with them. Able, Baker, and Charlie will be spearheading the 116th in the assault – speak to Major Isaacs when you can about the finer details.”

“Thank you, sir. I will.”

The men not at defensive mill about in the farmyard, greedily eating their K-rations, desperate for any chocolate they can get, and flicking through battered and damp editions of the 29th Infantry’s wartime newsletter, *Let’s Go!* Castiel was never terribly interested in reading about the rest of the Division – in his opinion, he already had enough to think about – but it was a good morale boost for the men, so he appreciated it.

As Castiel moves through the company to speak to various NCOs about the wellbeing of the men and the condition of the platoons in terms of cohesion and functionality, when seemingly out of nowhere, there is before him a private from the latest batch of replacements, sandy-haired and of stocky build, who stands up straight and snaps a hand across his brow in a neat salute. “Private Cole Trenton, sir, reporting for—”

There is a sinking feeling all through Castiel’s gut, and he wants to close his eyes, but he just looks blankly at Trenton – if it’s over, it’s over – until abruptly there is Dean, shoving Trenton hard.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Dean demands, as Trenton recoils and stumbles back. “Fucking saluting out here – Jesus, what the fuck is wrong with you?”

Trenton glances wildly between them. “Shit, sir, I – sergeant, I—”

Castiel lets out a long, slow breath. He has counted five seconds – now ten – and he is still alive, so there is a weight off his chest. “Don’t salute,” he says. He flicks his eyes pointedly in the direction of the nearest known German positions, and Private Trenton follows his gaze as he clarifies: “There are snipers in this area.”

“Don’t fucking salute, full-stop,” Dean tells him, his tone short. “Snipers or no snipers – we can’t afford to lose our CO just because of some asshole who—”

“Winchester,” Castiel interrupts. “That’s enough.”

Dean looks across at Castiel. It is hard to decisively pin down the expression on his face – it sits somewhere between defiance and concern – but Castiel knows that it does not stem from strict professionalism. Maybe Dean has laid some weird claim to Castiel in his head; maybe he thinks they’re boyfriend and girlfriend now. Castiel doesn’t know what it is, but he doesn’t need it and he won’t stand for it.

In response to Dean’s challenging look, Castiel raises his eyebrows. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?” he asks brusquely.

Dean presses his lips tightly together, as though he was contemplating some argumentative response, but thinks better of it. Thank God for that. He gives Castiel a quick nod and then walks away with hasty, purposeful strides.

Castiel returns his attention to Trenton. “What was it you wanted, private?”

Trenton flushes pink from the ears down. “Sir, I’m sorry for saluting, I didn’t mean to – I mean, I forgot that we’re not supposed to—”

“Private.”

“Sorry – I just wanted to, um – to report to you that I’ve been assigned to two-platoon, although Lieutenant Wallace recommended my relocation to three-platoon.”

“Oh, did he?”

Trenton blinks at him. “Yes, sir. He said they needed replacements more, but that I should come run it by you before I went anywhere,” he says falteringly.

Castiel gives a short nod. “I understand. Three-platoon will do. Inform your new platoon commander of the change – Lieutenant Hester, there; the tall, blonde one – and I’ll speak to the XO.”

“Thank you, sir!” Trenton says, and he makes a small jerk of the arm as though he was about to instinctively salute before he left, but thought better of it. He hurries away.

Letting out a long breath, Castiel reaches around to the back of his webbing to find his water bottle. Something about the way he is standing has shifted the pocket around to an awkward angle, and his fingers fumble with the strap to get it open. He twists, and strains, and then out of nowhere, there are hands on the back of his webbing, easily opening the pocket. Castiel glances over his shoulder with a small, grateful smile; Inias passes the bottle over.

Castiel untwists the lid and drinks. He then holds it out to Inias, but he shakes his head. “Nah, I’ve got coffee on the way,” he says. “I’m good.”

“Alright for some,” Castiel says.

“What are you griping about? They’d make you some if you asked, you know they would.”

Castiel shrugs. Asking for things isn’t in his nature, never has been. He wouldn’t know how to start, and anyway, he can make his own coffee. “I didn’t mean it,” he tells Inias, and he pulls his helmet off to scratch at the back of his head. “We’re due in Vire by tomorrow evening.”

“Am I allowed to know this?”

Castiel shoots him a withering look. “Of course you are, you’re my 3IC.”

Inias lets out a bark of laughter, surprised. “Oh, am I now? That’s a new development.”

“Then again, if I go out, Virgil’s within his right to change that, but I don’t think he’ll find you too terrible an option.”

“Shucks, babe. That means a lot to me.” Inias claps a hand on Castiel’s shoulder and gives him a small shake. His grin is wide, relaxed, and looking at it, Castiel feels slightly more at ease. “So – Vire.”

“Vire,” Castiel repeats, and lets his helmet hang from two fingers as he and Inias make their way slowly through the farmyard discussing the plans for the next day. The day has been overcast, but there are thin pale slivers of sunlight falling now upon the wood and stone of the old buildings, and there is much to be done before the assault.

4th August, 1944

What began as a light rainfall grows heavier until it is no less than a downpour, and as Castiel stands out in it, in the hazy grew light of an overcast dawn, he considers if this is the very last place on Earth he’d like to be, or if he can conjure up somewhere worse. Perhaps if he was in bed, with scarlet fever – that could be worse. Then again, at least if he had scarlet fever he would be somewhere dry.

Ahead, Vire rises out of the rain and the early morning fog like something from a fairy-tale, sharp spires and old brick buildings that appear stately until the smoke clears to reveal the rubble scattered around their bases. The 747th Tank Battalion are along the river to the west, with the 821st supporting, and the two of them – with the aid of the air force – are near enough levelling the city. In spite of this, the enemy are holding on, and have already launched one counter-attack in the direction of the 110th to the east. Castiel isn’t looking forwards to the moment they set their sights on the 116th.

He walks through the company, waiting for word from Major Isaacs so that they can move out into the assault; there is Sergeant Masters reminding some of the replacements to oil their weapons to keep them from rusting in the rain; there are Corporals Lafitte and Harvelle, laughing at some obscene joke; there is Private Gallagher, complaining as per usual. Castiel adjusts the strap of his helmet.

“Milligan?” he calls. “Get them ready.”

They move down through the trees into open fields as an arrowhead, with four-platoon and Castiel taking up the tail-end, and then as they come near enough the town to be within range of heavy artillery on watch, they break into a run. The German positions on the roads and watching all hidden routes towards Vire means that there is nothing to it except a straight sprint across the countryside until they reach the suburb of La Salliere. It isn’t ideal, especially in the rain, and as Castiel runs through the mud, one foot slides out in front of him and he finds himself completely unbalanced, and before he can do anything to save himself, he finds himself landing with a crash on his back.

Private Fitzgerald wheezes out a laugh nearby. “Shit, sir, you alright?”

Feeling thoroughly undignified, Castiel throws up a hand to indicate that he’s fine, and he scrambles back up onto his feet to follow the rest of the men.

One-platoon veers left, through the tree-line; three- and four-platoon run straight and disappear into the smoke; two- takes a dirt road to the right that twists around to the church-yard. Castiel follows, shoulders hunched against the rain as he runs.

Grenadiers lead the way, assault rifles lifted, and they hurry down through the driving rain, along narrow lanes until they come into an opening with buildings on three sides of a square. They split down the middle, taking left and right, machine-gunners set up with visual on the houses opposite, and their fire tears down quaint wooden window-shutters without remorse while the grenadiers and riflemen take the buildings to either side.

Castiel hangs back, taking a knee beside a low wall, and he watches as

the platoon smash into houses, toss grenades through open windows. Rifles crack out sharply, like the snapping of bones, and Sergeant Lafitte yells hoarse orders for the men to move up, move up.

They progress like this, all fire and aggression, and they meet small clusters of enemy riflemen tucked into boarded-up local stores, short-range artillery hidden in the gardens of little terraced houses. One of the new privates gets thrown back by one of their own grenade blasts, landing flat in the street, and T-4 Corporal du Mort comes up with his aid kit ready to keep his heart going as the private struggles against shock and third-degree burns. Castiel doesn't look; he drives his hand forwards in a sharp gesture to indicate enemy positions to Inias, on the other side of the street, and they divide the platoon into its fire-teams to flank either side of the old church.

Castiel takes squad one up the western side, with Private Fitzgerald up front as scout, and they move fast, ducking low through the cemetery and climbing the front steps for an easier vault over the wrought-iron fence. Machine-gunners settle beside some graves to set up gun-tripods and mount their weapons to aim, while the riflemen go ahead to see what's up ahead. They take out one single gunner in a low window of an abandoned hotel, and then Castiel stops in his tracks, because there is a Panzer rumbling slowly around the far corner.

At the head of the column, Fitzgerald spins to warn the others, his voice raw with panic and almost unintelligible but for the words, *take cover, take cover* – and as the men scatter before the gradual swivel of the turret, the silhouetted figure behind the mounted gun follows them, and machine-gun fire chatters out. Garth Fitzgerald is flung back by the impact like a ragdoll, and someone else is screaming for a medic when one would clearly be no good, and Castiel doesn't spare another moment to watch the Panzer's progress, because he takes off running.

A shell crashes into the side of the church and Castiel is skidding in the mud in his haste as he sprints, because there is an explosion of brick dust and smoke that threatens to buffet him over, and then wall is collapsing, rock and rubble coming down with the rain. There is the

hollow sound of the Panzer firing again, and Castiel has scarcely any idea of where he's going or what he's doing,, but he goes as fast as his legs can take him, and he throws himself down behind a pile of rubble.

He snaps his M1's safety off, twists on one knee, and pulls himself up behind the stone debris to look through the sights. For now, there is no infantry supporting the tank – its route down the road towards them seems to be a solitary one, and so lowers his rifle.

"Lietz," he shouts to the radioman tucked into nearby cover. "Get Wallace on the line – tell him about the Panzer." Castiel turns around then, in search of any soldier he can recognise who might be anything close to a marksman, but they lost Doe in Saint Lo and Miller is nowhere to be seen. He swears under his breath.

"Tell him what, sir?" Lietz is yelling back over the din.

Castiel stares at him, incredulous. "About the Panzer, Lietz," he says, at the top of his lungs, and doesn't waste any more time trying to spell out the obvious for the new recruit. He climbs up to his feet and moves for the other side of the road to find the rest of the squad. "Sergeant Lafitte," he calls out, only daring to raise his head above the parapet for an instant to project his voice before he can hear the mounted gun atop the Panzer turn in his direction, and then he cringes back towards the ground again. "Lafitte, take them away back around the hotel – pull back!"

They run to meet up with Inias and the other two squads, and work to find another way around as the Panzer creeps through the street in search of them, sounding its angry beat as it fires and fires into the buildings, and scatters brick and rock down on their heads at every turn. Inias radioes it in to Battalion HQ, and the next time a Brewster comes roaring overhead, Inias is shouting into Private Lietz' mouthpiece, "Below the church, nine-hundred mils, thirty-two degrees —" and then it seems the earth is torn asunder.

The ground pitches beneath Castiel's feet like an earthquake and he drops close to the ground with his eyes half-closed as the wave of thick, black smoke rolls over them. One-platoon was forced back by the Panzer, but they push on now, and call in to locate the rest of Baker and the 821st to orchestrate their next movements into Vire.

Every street is lit with the flashes of grenades going off, and as Castiel runs through the rubble and the smoke, he waits for the round with his name on. He weaves through the hollowed-out skeletons of old cars caught in explosions, and he calls in strikes from air support, and the 821's tanks hit hard to clear the way for Baker. The men move through crumbling buildings and flinch back from gunfire; Inias stumbles into a doorway to find a single survivor of a grenade hit, a German infantrymen fumbling at his belt for a pistol, and shoots him at point-blank.

Afterwards, Inias stares down at the body as though he isn't sure whether it's real, and Castiel has to haul him away by the sleeve. There is no time for introspection here. They have to keep going.

6th August, 1944

The push into Vire is a seemingly endless back-and-forth – they move up, they drop back, they move up again further down the line, and so on a thousand times. Baker Company loses five men to a particularly heavy shelling, and Castiel tries to stop himself from saying their names over and over again in his head as the 116th is pulled off the front line, but he can't. He's scared that if he forgets, then when his time comes, no-one will remember him either. He's scared that him forgetting will somehow mean that all of this is pointless, futile violence, and so he leads his men back towards Battalion HQ to the north, reciting under his breath: Private Collins. Private Feeney. Lance

Corporal Lin. Private Viano. Private McBride.

At least it seems that the rain is letting up, now no more than a drizzle that occasionally tips over rain-pregnant leaves in the trees overhead in a loud splash on helmets and cold hands. The men of Baker weave back through the fields and muddy lanes of Vire's rural outskirts with the soundtrack of war behind them – the yells and the thudding of shells and the low drone of bomb-heavy Brewsters overhead, the dull sound of anti-aircraft guns doing their best to bring the planes down. Castiel says silently, *Private Collins. Private Feeney.*

A hand to his shoulder jolts him out of his reverie, and he looks over to see Captain Laufeyson.

"Easy, Novak, she'll wait for you," Gabriel says cheerfully, as though he is oblivious to the chaos just over the river from them. When Castiel only gives him a blank stare, Gabriel holds his hands up in surrender. "Alright. Just a joke. You look like you're gonna give yourself a hernia."

"How many did you lose?" Castiel asks, his voice dull.

"Enough."

Castiel exhales, slow and unsteady. "Enough."

Gabriel looks over at him. "Kid. Do me a favour – lighten up." He nudges him with his elbow, then, and goes on in the same bright tone as before, "Now, come on. We gotta go hunt out the S-3 for what the hell is going on here. Apparently Isaacs heard that we're gonna be moving around west to hit up the Saint-Sever-Calvados road, behind the 821. Should be fun, right? Right."

Castiel doesn't answer. Private Collins; Private Feeney; Lance Corporal Lin. He follows Laufeyson.

After the briefing, Castiel finds a tent set up for his use – slightly larger than the bivouacs used in the field, which the other men are out in, and with the extra space occupied by a small desk and an unlit oil lamp. He drops his haversack, rifle, and musette bag on the thin roll of bedding, and crosses to lay his map-case open on the desktop. There is still enough light through the tent's opening to see, and so Castiel leafs carefully through the damp pages to examine exactly where Baker and the rest of the 2nd Battalion will be attacking in the morning.

As he plans, gradually Castiel becomes aware of a shadow just in the doorway of his tent, hovering uncertainly. "Yes?" he asks, without looking up.

The presence is now accompanied by the clearing of a throat – a sound that Castiel vaguely recognises as Dean, but which he does not allow himself to show any familiarity with – and then they take a few steps inside. "Sir."

"Afternoon, sergeant," Castiel says distractedly. "How can I help?"

"Uhh." Dean stalls. By the rustle of his moving feet on the groundsheet of Castiel's tent, it's apparent that he is shuffling, considering departure. He's nervous. "Well, I. I just."

Castiel looks up at him. He doesn't have time for dawdling and skipping around the point. "What do you want?"

Dean shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "Nothing, sir. I just,

uh. I wanted to see what you were doing. You know, if you were busy."

Castiel stares at him, expression hard.

Dean clears his throat. "I thought maybe you could use a break, is all."

Castiel thinks he knows what Dean is getting at, but he doesn't want to answer him yet. He wants Dean to say it. He wants Dean to admit that he wants it.

"You know," Dean goes on, and he swallows thickly. He glances over his shoulder to check for anyone in earshot. Seemingly satisfied, he takes another, hesitant step closer. "If you wanted to go for a walk."

"That was a one-off," Castiel tells him flatly, voice low. "We're not doing that again."

Dean shrugs. "Okay."

Whatever answer Castiel had anticipated from Dean, it was not that. Some whiny insistence, perhaps, or irritation; disappointment, at the very least.

He looks at him, and finds him gazing resolutely at the floor, for all appearances completely okay with the fact that Castiel sucked him off in an alley and then told him nothing was ever happening between them again. If anything, something about it pisses Castiel off.

“Good,” Castiel says.

“Yeah. Great. Just wanted to… you know, check.” Still staring down at the ground, Dean tilts his head to once side: the picture of nonchalance.

Annoyance flares up inside Castiel in spite of himself – because, really, he’s relieved that Dean doesn’t want this to go on. It’s much better this way; it was a mistake to let this go on as long as it did, anyway. “Well,” Castiel says, and he finds he is not in control of the way his voice comes out sharp and pissed off, “I’m glad we agree.”

After a moment, Dean says, “Absolutely,” and then he lifts his eyes to meet Castiel’s.

There is no doubt about it: there is desire there, dark and hungry. Dean wants Castiel – possibly now, and the very thought of it has a heat spiking in Castiel’s belly. Without thinking about it, Castiel’s lips part. His mouth has suddenly become very dry. “Good,” he says, again, hoarsely.

Dean takes a step closer.

“Winchester,” Castiel says warningly, but his voice is soft, barely audible, and his tone has no threat to it. He tilts his chin up in a gesture that would usually be authoritative, but in this context, he realises too late that it just exposes the underside of his jaw, the length of his throat. Dean’s eyes flicker to follow his skin, down to the neck of his shirt where he’s missed a button today due to the summer heat. In a rough, mechanical movement, Dean licks his lips.

Castiel swallows.

Dean reaches out, slowly, carefully, and curls his hand into the fabric of Castiel's shirt, just above the belt, and involuntarily, Castiel's breath catches in his throat. When Dean uses the grip to pull him gently forwards, Castiel finds himself unwillingly moving a step closer, and then another, until there is less than a foot of space between them. Dean's hand rests on Castiel's stomach, then, and Castiel is sure he must be able to feel the speeding pace of his blood, his heart beating fast just at the proximity.

At some point, Castiel realises distantly that his mouth has opened, that he is breathing ragged, and he is barely inches from Dean now – oblivious to when he had leaned in closer, and only aware now with the knowledge that he wants to be closer still. He wants to touch Dean, he wants to be touched; he wants to feel the heat of his mouth and the rough scrape of his hands all over his body.

With less than an inch between them, Castiel hitches one final breath and holds it. There is Dean's hand on Castiel's stomach; there is Dean's mouth, so close that he wouldn't even have to lean forwards to kiss him; there he is.

Castiel drags his eyes from Dean's mouth and slowly looks up to meet his eyes again. He can count his every freckle; his every eyelash. His hair is ruffled up at strange angles from wearing his helmet all day, and there is a pink rash along one side of his face where the strap has rubbed, and he has a small pale bruise on his forehead. His eyes are green.

Dean exhales. Castiel breathes him in.

"Winchester," Castiel says again, and his voice is rough this time. "I want you to take the oh-three-hundred sentry tonight on the westernmost point of the harbour area. Don't take anyone with you."

“Yes, sir.”

Castiel pushes him away. “Now get out,” he says. “I’m busy.”

“Yes, sir.” Dean gives a nod before he turns to head out into the evening, but there is the faint trace of a smug smile on his lips, and when he leaves, Castiel could almost swear he is *sauntering.* It’s just about unbearable, and already Castiel thinks that he has made a bad decision, but he can’t very well follow Dean out and call after him. He huffs down at his maps instead, and gets back to his planning. He doesn’t need these kind of distractions.

As he works, the light grows ever thinner and paler, until the pale grey of twilight becomes night, and Castiel switches on his oil-lamp. He starts his report from the last few days, to make it easier when he has to work on it after Vire – assuming, of course, that he gets through Vire in one piece, which is always a risky assumption. He writes up the casualties of the morning, and finds he doesn’t have to check his paperwork: he remembers the names.

By oh-one-hundred hours, Castiel is itchy with impatience. Inias came by at twenty-three-thirty-six, to see that he was alright and to offer his assistance with paperwork, but has long since gone. He checks his watch again.

He considers making another cup of coffee from the stale clumps of powder in his rations pack. He considers smoking another cigarette. He flicks at the corner of his cigarette tin, listening to it click and vibrate, and he decides he will have a smoke. While he lights up, he looks down at the stubby half-cigarette tucked away at the bottom of his tin, from the LCVP across the Channel. He wonders if he’ll be smoking it any time soon.

Castiel smokes down until he burns his fingers, and he coughs slightly at the end of the tobacco, and he runs a hand over his jawline to see if he needs to shave tomorrow morning or if he can get away with stubble. Then again, in the heart of the Battalion CP, he'd better not risk it.

Castiel checks his watch.

Oh-two-fifty-four.

He takes off his combat jacket and sniffs hesitantly at the armpits. It's not too bad, all things considered. He forces himself to settle at his desk a few minutes longer.

Oh-two-fifty five.

This is ridiculous.

Oh-two-fifty-eight.

His heart is beating fast like a bird in his chest.

He shouldn't be doing this. It's a terrible idea, and he could lose his job, and he could get the whole company killed with these ridiculous on-going distractions, and really, that is reason enough to just leave Dean alone on sentry, waiting all night. It would have no negative repercussions for Castiel, except perhaps Dean's disappointed face come the morning – although there should never be only one soldier on sentry. If Dean falls asleep, there will be no-one watching the eastern flank of the harbour area. The enemy could creep and kill an entire platoon before anyone could do anything about it. Leaving

Dean alone out there is actually the more dangerous option – it's truly in the best interest of the company for Castiel to meet him tonight. Lives are at stake.

Castiel removes his helmet, runs a hand backwards through his hair to flatten it, and replaces the helmet again.

He can't believe this is happening.

With determination in his every movement, Castiel pulls up his rifle by the sling and throws it over his arm. He heads out into the dark.

There is comms-cord strung up between bivouacs so that the men can find their way through the harbour area even in the dark, but Castiel has spent enough time pacing the forest floor here tonight that he doesn't need it. He cuts a path straight across.

Some fifteen yards from any other men's sleeping position – in case of enemy breach - a foxhole has been dug on the outward point of the harbour area, covered with a bivouac to camouflage it from external view. From the back, there is only the unusual curve of a branch to give it away, where Sergeant Barnes twisted down the slim bough of a poplar tree to help support the bivouac against any bad weather.

Castiel walks towards it, and he takes a deep breath, and he steps close so that he can be seen by anyone inside.

"Evening, sir," Dean says. Castiel doesn't say anything. There is a beat where they are silent, where they avoid each other's eyes and test the air for whether this is mistake – because they can still go back, now, and pretend this never happened – and then Dean says, "You, uh – you coming in? Only it's not all that tactical to just be standing around out—"

“Yeah, I know,” Castiel interrupts.

In any other situation, he would be astonished at the fact that Dean, of all people, is trying to chastise him for being irresponsible, but he is preoccupied with the knowledge that Dean is goading him, to get him down into that sentry position in the dirt and the dark. Dean wants him down there. Castiel’s mouth is very dry at the thought, and he is frozen where he stands because he wants so much and he knows from experience that he doesn’t get what he wants – but it is here now, in front of him. He could take it.

He looks down at Dean, there, and he can feel something aching in his chest, like the keen impression of a bruise, and he breathes in and out, and Dean looks back at him, and they say nothing.

Castiel climbs down into the foxhole.

He gets in clumsily, arranges himself to sit beside Dean in the small, cramped space – why on earth did he think this was a good idea? – and he loops his arms his pulled-up knees, for want of something to do with his hands. He glances over at Dean quickly and then away, out into the dark. The air is cool and damp with the warning signs for rain, but the light of the quarter-moon is clear silver through the trees. Dean is mere inches from him, close enough that Castiel can feel the warmth of him through his thin combat shirt. He can hear Dean breathing. He can hear the nervous flex of Dean’s fingers as they fiddle, first with the fabric of his combat pants where they crease at the bend of his knee, then with the end of a shoelace. He taps a quick staccato against the toe of his boot. Castiel swallows around a lump in his throat.

“Uh,” Dean says.

Castiel looks over at Dean again.

“So, it’s – uh. It’s a nice night out, huh—”

Castiel leans over and presses into Dean, kissing him with an open mouth. Just once, quickly. Then he pulls away, just far enough to breathe.

With his eyes closed and the tip of his nose bumping Dean’s, he thinks, *I am making a mistake.* With his eyes closed, Castiel can tell himself that this isn’t happening, that if he gets out of this foxhole and walks away, then nothing ever really happened between them. They can still come back from this. There is still space between their bodies.

Dean cranes his head up and kisses him. He licks into his mouth, captures his bottom lip. He breaks away for a moment as Castiel did, tilting his forehead to touch Castiel’s, and he inhales, but Castiel doesn’t give him the time to breathe. He pushes back, his mouth hot on Dean’s as he catches his lips once, then again, and Dean twists his body to tilt Castiel sideways, as though to press him against the damp wall of the foxhole.

There is a creep of panic underneath Castiel’s skin at the thought of that – Dean pushing him up against something again, taking what he wants and leaving Castiel breathless and dazed and out of control - because, God, he wants it so much that he can feel it beating low in his stomach, but Castiel cannot have that again. He is committing a sin, and he is ruining himself, but he will do it on his own terms. He will not have Dean breaking him apart when Castiel still needs to be whole.

He lifts his hands to grab fistfuls of Dean’s jacket and shoves him backwards, perhaps with more force than is necessary, and when Dean falls back against the wall with a startled grunt, Castiel follows him.

He leans over, one knee in the dirt between Dean's thighs, and the position is awkward and cramped so that he can feel pins-and-needles sparking at the base of one foot, but Dean's mouth is on Castiel's, fast now and urgent, and Castiel doesn't care.

Dean's hands skitter over Castiel's chest, down his sides; he grabs at his waist for a moment, curls his fingers into Castiel's belt-loops, then finally runs his hands up underneath his jacket, untucking his combat shirt. His hands are cold on Castiel's bare skin, and for a moment Castiel hisses out an annoyed sound between his teeth, but Dean, arrogant brat that he is, only gives a small laugh and skates his hands further, running cold fingertips across his stomach and the soft jut of his hipbones.

It's cold, and Dean is unbearable, cocky and far, far too loud for the circumstances, but all Castiel can do to shut him up is kiss him harder, hold on tighter to the front of his jacket. There is heat all underneath his skin, cutting his breath out ragged where he exhales sharply through his nose between each kiss, and he wants, he wants, he wants. Dean pulls at his bottom lip, digs his fingernails into Castiel's waist, and Castiel knows in that instant that he was wrong – there is no coming back from this – because a low, greedy sound spills unbidden from Castiel's mouth, and his hips pitch forwards to press his cock against Dean's hip.

Almost before he knows what he's doing, he finds himself rutting against Dean's thigh, and there is a flush of shame up from his chest, reddening his neck and jaw. He has the word *sorry* ready on the edge of his tongue, because yes, he may be queer, but he doesn't have to be such a fucking fag about it – and then Dean's mouth slows, and he pulls back slightly. Castiel runs cold all over, because he knows what is happening. Dean is not a homosexual. Dean is only pretending so that he can expose Castiel, so that tomorrow he can gather the whole company and Castiel's superior officers and say, *here is your commanding officer,* and tell them all about the hungry noises Castiel makes when he kisses a boy, and how restlessly his hips moved when he thought he had found another fairy to fuck.

The shame and humiliation of it prickles pre-emptively under Castiel's skin, and he pushes himself back with his hands still fisted into Dean's clothing. However, before he even straightens his arms, Dean plants a hand at the back of Castiel's neck, pulling him down to crush their mouths together again, and he slips his other hand between Castiel's legs.

Castiel jolts. He lets out all his breath in one burst, and for one moment, he is tense – the idea that this is all a trick playing over and over in his mind – and that at the next moment, he is soft-spined and melting underneath Dean's hands: Dean, who is gentle but insistent as he palms Castiel's cock through his combats. Dean keeps his grip on the nape of Castiel's neck and he kisses him hard.

Dimly, in the back of his mind, Castiel thinks that this is not something normal men do. That's all the coherent thought he manages, as Dean presses the flat of his hand harder, drags upwards, and Castiel's breath catches. He is breathless and dizzy, grinding forwards into Dean's hand, and his mouth is hot and wet on Dean's. He reaches between their bodies, fumbles awkwardly for the front of Dean's combat pants, but then Dean's hands come between them to push Castiel's hands away.

Dean shoves at him, the same as he did earlier – the only difference being that this time Castiel is disoriented with want, and his body is soft and compliant with whatever Dean wants. Castiel falls back against the far wall of the foxhole, his mouth open on a shaky exhalation. Dean gets Castiel's belt undone, his combat pants open.

Castiel holds his breath, but when Dean takes his cock in hand, he lets it out in a burst, and his hands fly up to grab Dean's shoulders, like he's holding on for dear life.

Dean swipes his thumb over the tip of Castiel's cock, and Castiel can feel it slip through the gloss of pre-come there, and Castiel lets out another shuddering breath before he thinks to close his mouth tight.

He closes his eyes, not wanting to look at Dean while this happens – he doesn't need the image of what Dean's face looks like while he touches Castiel like this seared into his mind forever, thank you very much, he's stuck on Dean Winchester enough as it is – and just concentrates on the sensation of his cock sliding through Dean's hand.

There is a pause – the sound of Dean spitting into his hand, with a loud noise like he made sure to hack up half a lung first, which is frankly disgusting – and then Dean's slick hand is on Castiel's cock again. He jerks him fast, his hand tight, and Castiel chants inside his head to the Lord or whoever else is listening that he's sorry, he's sorry he's doing this, he's sorry he loves every second of it, he's sorry that all he can think while this is happening is that he wants Dean to fuck him until he's sore and can't walk right, so hard that he forgets his own name. He thinks of the crucifix sliding across his collarbone underneath his combat shirt, and then he tries not to think of it, and then Dean swirls his thumb under the head of Castiel's cock and there is no more room for thinking anything.

Castiel has his hips rolling wildly up into Dean's touch, his mouth pressed into a tight line to hold back the small noises building in his throat, and he breathes heavily through his nose to try and hold himself steady. He feels as though he's shaking apart. His hands clench on Dean's shoulders to a bruising grip as the heat builds, and he can feel his balls tighten, and he wants to gasp out to Dean that he's close, he's so close, he's ready – but he feels an unspoken rule in the air between them that they don't talk while they do this, because they are not lovers. Instead he lets out one tiny sound, a whimper, as he clings on tight and fucks desperately into Dean's fist, and then somewhere outside there is a rustle of leaves.

Castiel freezes.

Dean's hand stills. "What—?"

There it is again – and then, without a doubt: footsteps.

Castiel shoves Dean away, hard enough that he falls back into the dirt, and then he is battling frantically with his pants and his belt. It's too dark though – he misses the button, once and then again, and he is scrabbling around for the other end of his belt where it came free of his belt-loops, and he still has to tuck his shirt in, get his combat jacket back on. His breathing is coming fast with panic, and he hisses at Dean, "Go – quick, go see who it is. Get out there – go, now!"

Dean blinks, startled. "But I—"

"*Now*!"

Dean scrambles out of the sentry and into the dark. After a moment, there is the quiet sound of his voice as he says something that Castiel cannot hear; there are murmurings in reply – more than one soldier out there with Dean – and for a fragile second, Castiel wants to shoot himself because he's so entirely fucked. He's sitting in the dirt struggling to do up his combat pants, and he's simultaneously going soft and also so aroused it hurts, and he thinks that it's just not fucking fair that he had to be born like this, so that he has to creep around in the darkness and fuck boys in secret and fear every moment of his life that he's going to be exposed and ruined.

He takes deep breaths, in and out, and just focuses on fixing his pants and tucking in his shirt and zipping up his combat jacket. This can't go on, he tells himself. This is a catastrophe waiting to explode. Castiel made himself vulnerable, he got distracted and he fell out of control and before he knew it, he was lost in want, and it nearly ruined everything. He can't do that again.

Eventually, footsteps retreat, and then Dean ducks back into the bivouac. "Well, that was awkward," he says, but there is a lilt to his voice that suggests that he actually finds it quite amusing. "You want me to get you off quick, before they come back?"

He puts a light, playful hand on Castiel's elbow, but Castiel shrugs it away. "Don't," he says, his stomach still pitching with the fear of how close he'd come to being discovered. He can't risk this anymore. It's too dangerous.

It doesn't matter for Dean – worst comes to worst, he can leave the army, run away back home to Sammy and Kansas. Here, in the army, is Inias, is having a purpose in his life, is being respected – and needed. Beyond the US Military, Castiel has nothing.

Back home, he has his mother's old house, the maple-lined streets of Bedford; he has distant relatives in Iowa who he doesn't speak to, and he has a resume with nothing more concrete on it than 'good with soldiers'. He thinks, perversely, from the pit of gloom into which he has fallen, that he could substitute that for 'good with men'. It's almost laughable.

Dean's hand hovers where it fell from Castiel's arm. "What? What's wrong?"

Castiel opens his mouth to tell Dean that it's over, but somehow he can't find the words. He has so much to lose here, of what little he has, and even though he knows that Dean will be his undoing, he can't summon the strength to lose him yet, either. What he says instead is, "The moment's gone."

Dean stares incredulously at him, and then a laugh bursts out of him. "The moment – I'm sorry, were you waiting for a *moment*?"

Castiel jerks to his feet and stands stock-still beside the sentry canvas, staring out at the dark blue-grey sky. His hands are balled into fists at his sides. "Go back to your tent."

“What?”

“I said, go back to—”

Dean climbs up to his feet and takes a couple of steps towards Castiel, his expression visibly bewildered even in the dark and out of Castiel’s periphery. “No disrespect, sir, but the fuck’s up with you? You’re not mad at me, are you?”

“Just go,” Castiel says firmly, and he moves as though to head off to trace the perimeter of the harbour area. He tries to pull out of his emotions, to detach himself, and he goes on in a voice that is disciplined and professional, “I’ll arrange the next sentry. Get some rest.”

“Wait, are you seriously pissed off at me? Look, I’m sorry that I don’t expect a lot in the way of goddamn romantic moments when we’re – in the fucking wilderness – come on, don’t—”

Castiel walks away, and that’s when he hears the first sign that this thing has already gone too far.

“Castiel—”

He stops dead.

Maybe Dean knows that he’s made a mistake. He is silent for several seconds, and then he tries, “Sir.” It’s too late for that.

Slowly, Castiel turns. When he speaks, his voice is flat, icy cold. “What did you just say?”

Dean retreats back a step, and he lifts his hands as though in surrender. “I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t mean to – I just – I thought—”

“Thought what?” Castiel challenges, and he takes slow, menacing steps back towards Dean. “I don’t know what you *thought*, sergeant, but allow me to make this perfectly clear. We are not friends. We are not going steady. You do not call me my first name. This – whatever this is – does not give you privileges. Do I make myself clear?”

In the dark, there is the dull sound of Dean gulping. “Yes, sir, but I just—”

“But you just nothing. That’s it.”

Dean stares at him. The line of his jaw is hard, muscles pulled tight, and his gaze is unblinking.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay, *sir*.”

Castiel’s eyes flick over Dean’s face, the tense set of his shoulders. “Go back to your tent. That’s an order.”

“Yes, sir.” Dean drops his gaze to the ground, and he turns away. Castiel returns to the sentry point and spends the next moments staring down at it, refusing himself the privilege of watching Dean leave. He doesn’t deserve that. He needs to pull himself together.

Only once he is certain that Dean is gone into the darkness does Castiel look up, and it is with a dry mouth and the heaviness of regret on his shoulders that he stares after him. He thinks of his name in Dean’s mouth, the way it sounded – familiar, like maybe Dean had been saying it to him all along and Castiel had just never heard him. He sounded safe; comfortable. He wants it again.

Chapter 8: Bretagne

Chapter Notes

> a couple of note re: warnings for this chapter - there's an instance of some pretty gory stuff towards the end, if that's not your cup of tea, and I also want to warn for some more weird, vaguely dub-con sexual dynamics between Dean and Cas (SPOILERO: Dean doing sexy things to Cas while Cas simultaneously tells him not to/eggs him on) so!! Just so that you're aware!!

7th August, 1944

Dear Sam,

We captured a city today! Not often I can write that, huh? It's not as bad and cool as I'm trying to make it sound, it was more like a town, but it was slow and it took a lot of freaking effort so I'll still count it as a massive achievement. I'm real proud of us – especially the mortar boys, they took the hard work from us in clearing the lines alongside some tankies. Maybe I'll buy them a drink when I get back to the U.S. Maybe I'll buy them the whole bar. The NCOs, most of all – this kid, Jack Montgomery, I didn't like too much but after all that shit he's growing on me a lot. Although, speaking of officers – will you leave it alone? I swear to God, it's under control, like I said. Yeah, I fucked up, yeah it's fine, yeah it's not a problem anymore. Happy? Happy. Great. Why are you so obsessed with Novak when you've got Jess? Is she not doing it for you anymore? Maybe you should give her some tips, show her how you like it, I don't know.

Shit, I'm sorry for saying that. I would rip up this letter and start again so you don't have to read it but I'm low on paper AND ink so I don't wanna waste it. Jess is a good girl, though. She sounds ace and I'm really happy for you two. Did she like her birthday present? Although it sucks you didn't know she was allergic… I guess maybe it'll be a story to tell the grandkids, huh. 'Back in the old days, when Jess and I first started dating, I fed her my mom's recipe for the best mac and cheese on the block, and she was too polite to say no, and she hurled for two hours'. I'm laughing my ass off just thinking about it – I hope you and Jess don't mind, but I've told that story

to everyone in my platoon and they think it's hilarious. They say she's a keeper, too, but. You knew that already, I'm guessing.

God. Is it bad to say I'm sick of hearing about dad? Or from dad? Don't tell him I said that, and don't let him see any of these letters, okay? I don't wanna be – never mind. It's just that from what you're telling me, and from the letters I'm getting – not that I get many – he's becoming even more of a pain in the ass. More drunk, more bossy… and yeah, I know what you're gonna say, so don't say it, because I'm not gonna tell him anything. If he fucks with you, I'll go crazy at him, tell him to go fuck himself or drink himself stupid or both. But I can't just do that out of nowhere for myself. You know I can't. As far as he's concerned you're a lost cause and I'm sorry for that, I really am, and I wish he could pull his head out of his ass to see that you're pretty awesome – but me and him we still have a chance. As long as I sit tight and do it like I'm doing, we'll be okay. And I'm not saying I need that, but. Anyway.

Providing I find some new ink and scrounge some paper, I should be able to write pretty regularly for the next couple days because we're just sitting around waiting to go off to next big assault, so if you get back to me real quick I can update you on the highs and lows of company life – because I know you're so thrilled to hear about the inner workings of Benny's digestive system. (Don't worry, he got over that. He's fine now.) Anyway, say hi to Jess and dad for me, and take care of yourself. I'll write again soon. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

9th August, 1944

“So get a load of this,” Corporal Johnny Mills says, and the others lean in close and expectant. “I’m in this ditch, just shy of the river as we’re coming up, and you know, there’s shells coming down and I think I’m gonna die, but what can you do—”

“Clench,” Private Bradbury suggests.

Andy Gallagher laughs. “Yeah, don’t do a Zeddmore!”

“Hey, shut up, man, it didn’t even happen like that—”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you—”

Mills lunges across the small fire to shove at Gallagher. “Christ, I’m trying to tell a goddamn story here, will you shut the fuck up?”

“Don’t know how!” Gallagher bursts out cackling, and rocks back on his heels where he’s squatted in the dirt, and Mills shoves him again until he falls over backwards. Castiel watches the interaction from the other side of the harbour area, and even though he feels strung out so tight that he could snap at any moment, he is glad to see that the other men are light-hearted for once – relaxed.

After capturing Vire, the 2nd Battalion have a couple of days to themselves while regimental staff work out what’s happening next. They got reassigned to V Corps, and already there’s talk of being moved again to VIII Corps, and while none of it is conducive to good company planning on Castiel’s part, it means that they’re off the front line for a while, and Castiel is always appreciative of small mercies. They have hot food, running water that they can pretend is hot; they can catch up with mail and *Let’s Go!* Yesterday Castiel overheard some

of them talking about playing some football. Of course, there are still patrols, and occasionally they run into trouble on their way around the surrounding fields, but for now it's as good as it's ever been since Falmouth.

"So as I was saying," Mills declares, with a pointed glare at Gallagher, "we're getting a shellacking, and I think I'm gonna die or shit my pants or both, and then I swear to you, out of goddamn nowhere, there's Major Everett - and he says to me—" and here Mills straightens up so as best to imitate the S-2'S voice – "*by heck, son, it sure is a darned nice day."*

Castiel frowns as they burst out into incredulous laughter, and he turns his attention back to the work in front of him. During a battalion briefing, he got a quick look at a sand table drawn up by the S-3 to indicate their next movements, and Castiel is now currently trying to replicate that sand table on a smaller scale, and to examine if there is any terrain depicted that is similar to what he has on his maps, so that he might know what to expect from the future.

He could sit back and take it easy with the rest of the officers – he could even strike up conversation with the soldiers, seeing as most of them like him well enough – but from the past forty-hours Castiel has already learnt that keeping busy is the best thing for him. If he's busy, he can't think too much, and so he can't get caught up going around and around in circles of *what if* and *why* inside his own head. He doesn't have to think about Dean.

Castiel wouldn't say he's preoccupied by recent events – but it does prey on his mind, and as a result he finds himself becoming increasingly irritable as he goes about his duties. Like everyone else, he's exhausted and sore and in desperate need of a rest, but in addition to this he's also more than slightly sexually frustrated, and barely able to think about anything except the fact that Dean is bold and shameless with what he wants. The knowledge of all this, plus the fact that Castiel knows that he shouldn't be doing any of it and should cut it all off as soon as he can – it only makes him worse. He's not in a good mood.

However, being bad-tempered is no excuse not to get things done, so Castiel sits cross-legged on his patch of soil, looking between his maps and his half-constructed sand table. It is not yielding promising results so far.

As time creeps on, Castiel at last makes progress: he traces a slow incline from his sand-table to the far south-western corner of his map. He is just trying to decide whether moving two-hundred miles down through Brittany is a likelihood or just clutching at straws when he is interrupted.

“How’s it going, Picasso?” Inias asks, standing over him with his hands in his pockets.

Castiel doesn’t look up. “What do you want?”

“Wow. Warm reception, I love it.” Inias shakes his head. “Jeez, I only came over for a conversation – what’s it gonna cost me?”

Castiel doesn’t bother answering that. He isn’t in the mood to pander to Inias; anyway, he’s busy.

With a groan, Inias drops down to crouch beside Castiel, sitting back on his heels for comfort, and he pulls his hands out of his pockets to trace the lines of Castiel’s sand table. “Okay, so tell me who it was,” he says.

“Who what was?” Castiel asks distractedly.

“Who it was that pissed in your cornflakes. Was it Hester?”

Against his better judgement – and the desire to remain irritated with everyone and everything for as long as possible – Castiel gives a small, rueful smile. “I could do with some cornflakes,” he admits.

“I’ll put in a word to the General.” Inias tilts his head slightly to one side to better see the sand table. His eyes move across the roads laid out with twigs, the curves of hills scooped out in small mounds of dirt. “So. Hester?”

“Hester’s fine,” Castiel says. “I spoke to him last night about his unconventional reprimand techniques and he should be alright… I haven’t seen him since but I don’t see any reason why the problem should progress.”

“Not Hester, then. Alistair?”

“No.”

Inias lets out a short laugh. “Is this like a guessing game? Okay, what about Isaacs?”

“Inias,” Castiel sighs.

“So it is the honourable Major! Is Isaacs being—”

“It’s not Major Isaacs, Inias, but it doesn’t mean anything is—”

“What about Winchester?”

Castiel hesitates. “No.”

Inias looks at him.

“No, Inias.”

With a friendly hand to Castiel’s shoulder, Inias says, “Babe, you’re a force of nature and the love of my life, but if you lie to me, I will take a shit in your foxhole. Now, is he just being a jackass or is it worse than usual, because I can always—”

Castiel shrugs away from his hand and throws him a sharp look. “It’s nothing – leave it.”

“That’s too bad. I do have a really powerful shit that’s been backed up for about four days, so your foxhole is gonna be absolutely—”

“Inias, will you stop?” Castiel snaps, and he doesn’t mean to lose his temper, but before he can say anything to ease the sting, he sees Inias flinch back, and then the next thing is that Inias is staring at him with an expression that falls somewhere between confusion and disbelief.

They look at each other for a moment over the half-finished sand table, silent, and then Inias just says, “Cas, what have you done?”

Castiel looks away. He reaches over to pull his map of Pays-de-la-Loire closer.

Inias leans closer. “Cas.”

“What?” Castiel says, voice low and sullen.

“You’re kidding me,” Inias says flatly. “Cas—”

“It’s nothing, Inias, I swear, I just—”

“What have you done – you didn’t—?”

“Of course not!” Castiel shoots back, and he glances over his shoulder to see if anyone is nearby to overhear them. The coast is clear. He turns back, guiltily avoiding Inias’ eyes. “We didn’t – we almost, but —”

“Shit, Cas, this is—”

“I stopped him,” Castiel hisses furiously. “We almost, but I stopped him, and we didn’t. Are you happy now?”

Inias pulls off his helmet and scratches at the top of his head. “Jesus, I don’t know what to say. I mean, yeah, I made a couple jokes but I didn’t think you’d actually… shit.” He looks at Castiel with his eyebrows raised, appearing almost desperate. “You know I was kidding, right? I was only making fun, you gotta know that—”

Castiel doesn't know if that's supposed to make him feel better. If it is, it isn't working. He feels stung by it, but he pushes down the sense of hurt and injustice – because he's not a child anymore, and he has a thick skin now, and it isn't supposed to hurt him anymore to hear how he's just a big joke to all society. He sets his jaw against the feeling. "Inias," he interrupts. "Don't. Please, don't—"

"Don't what, exactly?"

"Don't… say whatever you're about to say. I don't know why I'm doing it, I don't know what's wrong with me," Castiel says, although that is not strictly true. He knows exactly what is wrong with him. What is wrong with him is that somewhere between the building of the top of his head and the tip of his toes, God decided it was a slow day or time for a cruel joke, and made him a goddamn homosexual. That's where this all falls down, because he's queer, and Dean is a gentle, infuriating pain in the neck with a soft gaze and a quick mouth, and he can't help himself.

Inias just looks at him, his eyes somewhere between sadness and pity. For several moments, he doesn't speak, and when he does, his voice is quiet. "You know you can't do this."

Castiel huffs a short laugh without humour. "It's too late for that. It's done."

"That's not what I mean and you know it."

Castiel averts his eyes.

"Babe, you like that boy."

Castiel scoffs. “I have to like him, he’s Baker’s senior medical NCO.”

“Cas, I’m serious.” Inias leans in closer, his head turned away so that they don’t look suspicious, so that from afar it looks like they’re discussing the sand table together. “Please don’t do this. And not because I don’t like it, or because I don’t like him, or because I don’t like the way you are, or whatever – you know, I think he’s a good kid, and you suit each other nicely, but… please don’t do it anymore.”

“We’re not doing anything,” Castiel says, somewhat sourly as he thinks back on the aborted attempt at a rendezvous at the sentry point.

Ignoring him, Inias goes on, “This isn’t a debutante ball, Cas, okay, this is war,” and Castiel almost hates him for it.

There’s something patronising about it, as though Castiel is some reckless idealist forever running off with romantic notions in his head – as though Castiel has ever looked on his personal life and inclinations with anything but shame – and for just a moment, anger flares up inside him. He wants to shove at Inias, to tell him to fuck off, that he doesn’t know what he’s talking about and he has no idea what it’s like – but he can’t, because at the end of the day, Inias is all he has.

Castiel swallows it down. “Don’t worry about it,” he says tonelessly, and he stares down at his maps. “It’s under control. I know that he’s a distraction and a liability, and I won’t let myself get caught up in anything that could jeopardise my command of Baker. I know better than that.”

Even to Castiel’s ears, it sounds rehearsed and fake, and Inias is

looking at him like he doesn't believe a word of it. Castiel isn't so sure either.

12th August, 1944

Castiel calls his officers and non-coms in a circle around him to be briefed. They take a knee, pull out small notebooks. "Listen in," Castiel says.

Word has come down from Battalion, and indeed from the 116th Regimental staff, to say that they'll be moving out south-east in the direction of Brest any day now. There the enemy are holding a submarine base along the coast which remains the last harbour area between the Allied forces liberating the entire north-eastern shoreline, and is a massive tactical advantage to the Germans. It's a severely difficult target, and Castiel foresees something like a siege or massacre – but first they have to get there.

"Officers already know this, but our next target is Brest – a naval city some two-hundred miles from here. The 29th Division will be there in its entirety, alongside most of the rest of the VIII Corps, plus the 6th Division and some armoured, and I've been told we can expect air support." Castiel looks over his men, expression severe. "It's going to be bigger than Saint Lo, so make sure the men are ready. We won't be moving out for a few more days , thankfully, so we do have time to prepare. Platoon leaders, I want regular PT sessions, I want them going over their drills – starting tomorrow morning, oh-six-thirty after an early breakfast. Alistair, you're in charge of liaising with the mess officers on that. I want progress reports by twenty-hundred-hours from each of you, detailing any men falling behind or otherwise struggling so that we can reorganise accordingly – we don't need to lose a whole squad just because one man sprained his ankle two weeks ago, am I clear? Virgil, ensure it gets done. Sergeant Masters, I want a full inventory of rations, ammunition, shells, everything, by noon – let's say twelve-thirty – and from Lafitte, I want details of any ongoing injuries that might affect them. Work with Lieutenant Virgil on that,

as he'll have progress reports to help you."

"Yes, sir."

Castiel glances between them. "Any questions?"

Inias raises his hand.

"Wallace?"

Inias stretches out one leg in front of him. "Do these pants make me look fat?"

Castiel rolls his eyes as the rest of the senior men laugh, and Lafitte makes a show of looking Inias up and down with a grimace on his face. "Anyone except Wallace?" Castiel asks.

"No, sir," Hester speaks up, and the others murmur along the same lines.

"That'll be all, then. You're dismissed."

As the men climb up onto their feet, stretching out their cramped legs before they head off back to their respective duties, Inias pushes playfully at Castiel's shoulder. "Come on, babe, I'm funny."

"You're not," Castiel tells him.

“You need to lighten up. Turn that frown upside down. You know? Keep your pecker up.”

Castiel raises his eyebrows. “Excuse me? Keep my—”

“Yeah, okay, maybe not that one – I hear Bradbury’s already traumatised so maybe you’re better off keeping it in your pants,” Inias says, and he ducks away quickly as Castiel reaches out to smack him.

“You’re a nightmare – get out of my sight,” Castiel says, and he does his best not to smile, but as Inias gets up and dances away out of reach of another smack, he can’t help it.

Inias grins. “There we go. That’s an improvement. Try work on keeping that there – maybe laugh once in a while. By the way, laughing is those noises other people make when they’re having a good time.”

“Okay,” Castiel says, half-smiling, and he wonders how exactly he’s supposed to have a good time leading a company to war, but he doesn’t say it. He just watches Inias saunter away down the street in search of someone else to bother, his step light-hearted and easy. Castiel’s smile slips from his face. Not for the first time, nor probably for the last, he asks in his head why Inias couldn’t have been made CO.

There’s no use thinking about that now, however. Castiel lets out his breath in a decisive, short burst, and steadies himself for the rest of the day by running through a to-do list: urgent, important, unimportant but necessary. First, he’ll go to Battalion CP.

He turns to move down the main street in the direction of Battalion, and instead finds himself abruptly face-to-face with Sergeant Winchester.

Castiel flinches back, startled. “Dean—” he says – it slips out by accident, and as he feels his face flush out at the idea of someone overhearing the misconduct, he reminds himself that any officer could call their subordinate by first name if their mood was right. Inias does it all the time. Castiel swallows.

Dean tilts his chin up by way of greeting. “Sir,” he says. “Am I mistaken, or did I hear Lieutenant Wallace talking about your pecker?”

“You’re mistaken.” Castiel looks him over – measuring the confident breadth of his stance with his feet planted wide and solid, the curve of his smile, the cocky way he tilts his head over. The time off the front line has done Dean good. He’s washed his face properly for the first time in weeks, and there is water in his hair as though he even made an effort to get the mud and cam-cream out from under his helmet, and his hair now sticks up in dishevelled clumps. He has swapped out his blood-spattered combat jacket for his shirt only, and his hands are, for once, clean. He looks good, and he has that lopsided grin on his face that’s all self-assured arrogance. Castiel wants him, instantly, but that split-second of heated irresponsibility is followed by the memory of his conversation with Inias. He sets his jaw. “What is it?”

“Well,” Dean starts, and he draws the word out long and slow, and he turns his head towards one shoulders to surreptitiously look behind him. Castiel knows what he’s after.

Inias’ words are in Castiel’s head, and he says, “No.” It’s bad and it’s dangerous and they shouldn’t. He could get discovered; he could get fired. It’s wrong. His being distracted could get the whole company killed, and it’s irresponsibly, and it’s dirty and wrong and his mother raised him better. He thinks of his mother, and of Inias, and of the

cool touch of his crucifix beneath his shirt.

Dean blinks at him. “What?”

“No,” Castiel repeats, more firmly.

“Sir—”

“Don’t make me raise my voice, Winchester. I said no.”

Dean lets out his breath in a frustrated burst, and he looks away for a moment. He twists his lower lip under his teeth, and Castiel very carefully doesn’t look at his mouth. “Sir, is about that thing I said?”

Castiel sighs. “Winchester—”

“Because, honestly, sir, I didn’t mean to and it was just – an accident, okay, a really dumb thoughtless accident—”

“We’re not doing this anymore,” Castiel interrupts.

For several seconds, Dean just stares at him, and in the thin grey light of an overcast afternoon, his eyes are so copper-green that it’s hard not to kiss him. Castiel steels himself against all the things he wants, sets his jaw, and stares straight back. At last, Dean says, “But – I don’t understand—”

“You don’t need to understand.”

“But—”

“In fact, there is nothing for you to understand,” Castiel goes on, thinking even as he speaks that Dean’s mouth, slack with confusion, looks soft and sweet and warm. He glances backwards to ascertain that no-one is within earshot. “We’re not doing that anymore. Do I make myself clear?”

Dean’s shoulders slump down. “Clear, sir.”

“Good.” Castiel eyes him, and honestly, he’s expecting slightly more of Dean’s trademark belligerence – the idea that he isn’t even going to argue further is something of a disappointment.

“Good,” Dean echoes.

Castiel breathes, and there in the air is the smell of him: hard Army-ration soap, ink and morphine on his clothes, salt sweat faint on his skin. Castiel wants him.

“Nothing further, then, sir,” Dean says, and although he sounds slightly embarrassed, there is no remorse in his voice. Castiel hates him for it.

“That’ll be all, sergeant.”

Dean gives a short nod to acknowledge him in lieu of a salute, and then he turns, a slow pivot on his heel, and trails off in the direction of one-platoon, presumably in search of his friends. Watching him go,

Castiel feels unsteady with the sense that he's done the wrong thing – even though he knows perfectly well that turning Dean away is not simply the best option, rather the only option.

He takes off his helmet, rubs a hand through his hair. Since showering in the tent set up alongside Battalion CP, it's come to his attention that it's getting long, but there isn't a lot he can do about it now.

Castiel passes through the CP, picks up some of the reports he needs for administrative work later, and continues through the narrow, rubble-littered streets. He doesn't know where he's going until he finds himself standing in the doorway of a small church, and by that stage he feels like he can't turn away. He goes in.

The ceiling has been shelled out in two places, and there is water dripping in onto a dust-covered altar. At the back, the Lord on his crucifix has fallen from the wall, and lies face-down in a small heap of brick-dust. Castiel kneels, and he prays.

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done—

He kneels in the pews until his legs ache and an icy chill shudders all the way up from the cold flagstones through his legs. He prays only in his head, his mouth moving silently, making excuses and apologies for the things he's done.

The last time he says the Lord's Prayer, however, he says the final lines aloud.

"*—and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*."

He's never had a problem with temptation before.

16th August, 1944

There is a pot-hole in the road, and as the back of the deuce-and-a-half rattles up and down on rickety axels, Castiel jerks blearily awake. For several moments he is disoriented, squinting out through sleep-blurred eyes at the figures around him all cast in darkness as the night grows heavy. There are two glowing red embers in the gloom – cigarette-butts – and it is on these that Castiel dimly focuses until his eyes adjust and he comes to recognise the silhouettes of the men of one platoon. Dean Winchester, Charlie Bradbury, Andy Gallagher…. Castiel looks over to see what exactly he was leaning on, and finds Joe Harvelle smirking at him.

Castiel heaves himself upright with a grunt, and is abruptly conscious of a damp patch on his cheek which doesn't bode well for Harvelle's shoulder. "Sorry, corporal."

Embarrassing as it is to have fallen asleep on one of his NCOs, Castiel can't summon the strength to be entirely humiliated. He doesn't know why, but he's been having trouble sleeping recently, and so he is grateful for any sleep he can snatch, regardless of where it is or who it may be leaning on.

"No worries, sir," Harvelle says, and touches his forefinger to his temple in a lazy approximation of a salute.

"We hated to disturb you," Gallagher says, by way of explanation for Castiel's inelegant collapse going unchecked, and Bradbury chips in that he looked like he needed it. "Plus," Gallagher goes on, "you looked so cute and angelic, and all."

“We should’ve got Benny to sketch it for you,” Dean says around his cigarette, and when Castiel looks over at him he finds that Dean’s expression is shifty, somewhat nervous, as though he isn’t quite sure if his addition to the conversation is in some way trespassing the boundaries that Castiel had set. With teasing hesitance, Dean adds, “He could do it all nice in charcoals or something.”

Harvelle laughs. “I’d frame that.”

Castiel sits up straight and stretches until his back pops – at which Bradbury pulls a face and makes a small gagging noise. “Where are we?”

They moved out from Vire a few days ago and are on their way to the southern coast of France, some two hundred miles away, where Brest and thousands of hostile German soldiers are waiting. It’s a long and uncomfortable journey with men and equipment all piled in together, and with minimal stops along the way, unless word comes from Battalion that there is a position along their route in need of exploring. At this point two-thirds of France belong to the Allied Forces, officially speaking, but this is not to say that there are no German positions still being held, especially as they get further south, where the various Allied regiments have no strayed so far.

“No idea, sir,” Harvelle says.

“France, I think,” says Gallagher, and Bradbury slaps his arm.

Castiel leans over a box of ammunition to reach for the flap of heavy fabric that covers the flatbed from enemy eyes. It doesn’t matter if he lifts it for a moment, and as there is no light inside the truck anyway, there isn’t a lot of difference in what potential German spies would be

able to see.

Outside, the air is rain-clean and sharp with a chill that belongs in September, at least. Castiel squints out into the dark, and once his eyes have adjusted he picks out the long stretch of road and the fields on either side – sunflowers to one side, some short and stumpy-leafed crop to the other – with the occasional small building of wood or stone. The world is faintly illuminated in white and silver by a three-quarter moon, streaked with thin cloud, and Castiel thinks that if it weren't for the war, it would be nice to live out here, far from city life, and live off the land. He isn't sure whether to be envious or not for the inhabitants of these areas.

"What's the news, weather man?" Gallagher says from inside the deuce-and-a-half.

"Weathermen don't tell the news," Castiel says as he pulls his head back inside. "It's a nice night. Clear."

"Sounds romantic," Bradbury says teasingly, and while Harvelle laughs out loud at that, Castiel makes the mistake of looking over at Dean.

Dean's eyes are already on Castiel with a faraway look, and as soon as he meets Castiel's gaze he flushes up from the collar and looks away out the back of the deuce-and-a-half. Castiel drops his eyes to stare at his knees, and he takes a moment to try and stretch his legs to avoid cramping up.

Harvelle peers past Castiel for a look outside. "Shit. It is kinda pretty – why don't you write about this shit?" he demands of Bradbury. "Less of that *fear of war, fear of God* bullshit. More – I dunno. Romantic crap."

Bradbury gives a small, nervous laugh. “Who the hell am I gonna write romance for, over here?”

Castiel stretches one leg, then the other. He rolls his ankles from side-to-side, his boots creaking as he does so, and he feels Dean’s gaze come flickering back towards him.

Gallagher clears his throat, and holds out two hands to indicate that he wants silence for his performance. He begins in a dramatic voice, “It’s cold outside, and fucking dark… on our way from Lanrivoaré… it’s not a walk in the park … wish we were back in Lanrivoaré.”

Bradbury starts to laugh.

Harvelle just stares at him. “That was… terrible.”

“What? Come on, that was good shit, it rhymed and everything.”

“I don’t think it counts as rhyme if you just say the same word twice,” Castiel comments drily.

Dean lets out this laugh, a short, noisy burst, and Castiel ends up frowning over at him – because Dean is so loud and so obvious, and it wasn’t even that funny, but it seems nothing is amiss with the other men. Dean doesn’t even look terribly embarrassed by his obnoxious outburst, and instead he leans forwards in his seat to declare that he’s been reminded of some joke his little brother told him in his latest letter.

Castiel pays attention, because even if he does hate most of Dean's jokes for being lewd and inappropriate, any joke told by Sam Winchester is probably acceptable.

"So there's these four guys at a high school reunion," Dean starts, and he looks around at each of the men in the back of the truck to ensure they're all paying attention. "And one of them goes to the restroom, but the others guys, they're not about to stop the whole conversation just 'cause this one person has left, so they get to talking about how successful their sons are."

Castiel finds himself looking at Dean's mouth.

"—and the second guy, he comes out – *I can do better than that. See, my son is doing so well for himself, he's got his own car dealership and he's just been giving his best friend a Healey sports-mobile, so—"*

Without meaning to, Castiel's thoughts have strayed into dangerous territory. He swallows hard and makes a point of tuning back into Dean's joke. He does not need to be thinking about the soft pink Dean's lips would turn when bitten and kiss-swollen; he definitely doesn't need to think about the slick heat of Dean's mouth whenever they kiss, when Dean pushes Castiel up against whatever available surface is nearby and presses into him like he could own him.

The men around Castiel are laughing. Castiel has missed the joke, and he realises he couldn't recall a single word of it even if he were paid to, but he can feel Dean's eyes turning to him. Castiel drags his eyes away from Dean's mouth and forces a small laugh, but it's too late. Dean is frowning at him, his lips slightly pouty with confusion, and all Castiel can think is that he wants those lips on him. He wants the coarse, scraping touch of his hands. He wants the subtle way Dean rocked his hips when Castiel reached down for his belt, the breathy sound he made, and Castiel needs to stop.

Castiel shifts his position – one which has become simultaneously very uncomfortable and very exposed – while he fights against the heat building low in his abdomen, and he digs in his combat jacket for his cigarette tin. He fumbles to get the tin open, internally listing things that don't arouse him – Major Singer, and horses, and the cold decay of the meat in the ration-packs when they're left out for too long – and swears in a whisper when he discovers the tin empty, with the exception of the half-cigarette stub from the LCVP on D-Day. Castiel snaps the tin closed. "Anyone got a spare smoke?"

Bradbury digs in the pockets of his combats. While he waits, Castiel flicks distractedly at the dented corner of his cigarette tin in his pocket – chanting like a mantra, *don't think about Dean, don't think about Dean* – but then, before Bradbury can find his tin, Dean holds out a cigarette.

Castiel ignores him. He keeps staring at Bradbury, waiting.

"Sir," Dean prompts, and then it's unavoidable.

Corporal Harvelle nudges Castiel's shoulder for his attention. "The doc's got one," he says.

Castiel looks over as though he had no idea, and reluctantly he reaches across to take the cigarette. In spite of his best efforts to get this over as quickly as possible with no extended interaction, somehow Castiel's fingers end up brushing over Dean's, and Castiel stoicism is for nothing as his stomach flops over like he's a teenage girl being asked to prom. "Thanks," he mutters.

He lights up and breathes in deeply. Dean's eyes are still on him, and Castiel tries not to take any notice. He doesn't give himself the space to assess what that look means – if it's professional, or simply friendly; if it's heated. Castiel exhales smoke.

17th August, 1944

Some days later, as the 116th are weaving down south, the convoy comes to a gradual, groaning halt and doesn't start up again. For a while the deuce-and-a-half's engine continues to rumble underneath them, lulling the men into a false sense of security, but then all goes quiet. Castiel looks up with a frown.

"Why have we stopped?" Ash Lowell asks around a spoonful of rations.

In daylight, the flatbed is uncovered, and so Castiel stands up on his bench to peer over the sides and see if he can work out what's happening. There is no sign of any movement, except for the other soldiers he can see climbing curiously up to look out of the trucks. Then he sees it – further down the road, at the front of the convoy, there is a thick plume of dark smoke curling up from the earth.

"Can you see anything, sir?" Private Tran calls up.

Castiel squints, holding a hand up to shield his eyes. The bad weather has cleared up in the last few days, and has since given way to stifling summer heat and yellow light that sears the eyes to look into the distance. "I think there's been a fire. Something's happening at the front of the transport."

"Maybe one of Able's trucks blew an engine," Tran suggests.

Ash snorts into his ration pack. "Serves 'em right."

A small smile curls at the corner of Castiel's mouth, but he can't help feeling worried. The whole convoy wouldn't stop for one broken-down truck; something is wrong.

Eventually, word does come up via a runner from Battalion for Castiel to head down the convoy towards the truck where Major Singer is. There he meets the other company commanding officers for a briefing – and Castiel is surprised to see Major Isaacs smeared with dirt and what looks like soot. It turns out that the truck at the front of the convoy – a deuce-and-a-half containing a dozen crates of ammunition and an artillery NCO – went over a land-mine. The truck is no more than firewood; the NCO is dead. It's a rough blow for Able Company, but somehow Castiel just feels the warmth of relief that it wasn't Baker.

Once they've been briefed on what's happening, Singer turns over to Major Campbell to tell them what is going to follow, and then they are dismissed back to their companies to set about taking their men on patrols out in each direction of the convoy in case of enemy positions watching them, while in the meantime Battalion staff will be working to clear the road.

Castiel goes from truck to truck rapping his knuckles smartly on the sides and calling out for Virgil, Hester, Inias, Alistair, and First Sergeant, and he takes them all to sit in the back of an empty truck to tell them what's happened and discuss their next movements.

"Now, Battalion aren't sure if the mine was just leftover from previous German movement," Castiel says, once he's explained the mine and the truck full of ammunition and the ridiculously long time it'll take Battalion staff to deem the road safe, "but if it isn't just a one-off, there's a wooded area just north-west of our position and a village two miles east – either of which could be holding an enemy position. Whichever way you look at it, Battalion's bringing forwards minesweepers to clear the road, and we're not going anywhere until that's done, so we're patrolling out towards the village in the mean-

time." Castiel looks across his officers, and then unfolds his map to show them the plan. "Charlie, Dog, and Easy are taking the woods, and we'll be pairing up with Fox and Item – they'll be taking the route straight across through those fields there, and Baker will be taking the right flank."

He traces his index finger along the whorls and contours of the surrounding landscapes.

"This building here will be our first rendezvous point. Then one- and two-platoon will come around this side of the cow-barns, cut across here, and follow that route up towards the village. Three- and four- will continue straight ahead from that point, clear a couple storehouses and sheds set up along this line here, and then our final rendezvous will be this pocket here – we'll get cover from the village that way. If you're engaged at any point prior to the village, just retreat to the previous RVP once you have intel on what we're up against and we'll plan accordingly." He raises his eyes, expression hard – focusing particularly on Hester for a moment, who occasionally has trouble with his gung-ho attitude. "And that is an order, not a recommendation. I know this is just a small patrol, but I don't want anyone getting hurt unnecessarily because people weren't taking it seriously. Is that clear?"

Hester frowns at having been singled out. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Go get the men on board – I want everyone out here five minutes from now, in herringbone formation ready to move." Castiel stands up straight as some kind of formal acknowledgement since he can't salute. He gives a curt nod. "Alright. Dismissed."

The men of Baker drop their equipment with the transport – keeping webbing and weapons only – and they kneel in the sun-baked dirt ready to move out. Castiel stands by the front of the formation, arms crossed over his chest as he waits for a couple of mortar-men sorting through their musette bags.

“Any day now, private,” Castiel says. He rolls his eyes and as he looks away. His gaze snags on Dean Winchester, crouched towards the tail-end of the formation, and there is something hot and dark in Dean’s look that makes Castiel’s stomach pitch nervously. Out of nowhere, his mouth is dry and his chest is tight, and he frowns at Dean. “What?” he demands.

Dean says, “Sorry, sir.” He doesn’t look sorry. He looks like he wants to push Castiel into the nearest unobserved corner and touch him roughly, breathlessly, and Castiel’s mind is already going too far. He has a hot flush of red all up the back of his neck.

He tears his eyes away and stares down the convoy, at where Private Gardner and another mortar-man from four-platoon are adjusting his webbing. “Today, privates,” Castiel says pointedly, and at long last they move out east.

The company splits, once, and then again, as they patrol further from the road, and after the first rendezvous point, Castiel goes with one-platoon. They move at a steady pace along the far side of a field of bedraggled sunflowers who turn their wilting brown faces to the ground more than to the sky, and they swing their rifles in slow arcs in search of something to be afraid of.

Up ahead, there are storehouses that Private Zeddmore gets open, first smashing a window with the butt-end of his rifle and then tossing a potato-masher in to tear into shreds anything left inside that didn’t get the message. They’re empty, save a few burlap sacks of softly rotting fruit, and so Sergeant Lafitte moves them up a little faster to the next point.

The sunflowers melt into rapeseed, and then disintegrate into a low brown field pockmarked with small humps of dirt and no other sign of life, and one-platoon pick their way carefully over the field at a

diagonal.

“What do you think this shit is?” Kevin Tran asks conversationally, as Sergeant Milligan’s ankle rolls over on a stone and he stumbles.

“Cow shit, probably,” Miller ruminates.

“Not literally, ass-hat – I mean, what’s growing?”

“I think maybe tomatoes.”

Zeddmore rolls his eyes. “Don’t make yourself look dumber than you are, Max. Tomatoes grow on trees, remember?”

First Sergeant Mark Masters and Sergeant Milligan exchange an incredulous look. Masters is the first to find the words to respond. “You’re kidding, right?”

Castiel tries not to laugh. However, his attention is quickly drawn by the low, echoing sound of a shell being fired, and instantly he drops into a crouch; the others fall silent at the same time and follow his lead.

After a moment, the world grows quiet again, and either way no shell comes down to tear them all apart, so Castiel turns to frown back at his NCOs. “Lafitte,” he says, and jerks his head to indicate for him to come up. “Was that from the village or from behind us?” Since being caught in that shell-blast on D-Day, his hearing has been slightly unreliable, and he doesn’t trust himself to make an accurate judgement.

Benny scrunches up his nose. “I’d say village, sir – other side, though. Down Fox Company-a-ways.”

“That’s what I thought. Get Dog on the radio.”

The shelling starts up again – distant and irregular as before – and Private Pond comes up with Captain Laufeyson on the line, who is cackling down through the fizzing static. *Yeah, we’re getting shelled but it’s – they’re not really peppering us – either they’re holding back for – or they’re – maybe understaffed?* Another laugh. *Guess there’s a recession on – over.* Sometimes Castiel gets irritated at Gabriel’s unorthodox methods both of fighting and of communication, but the information was valuable and he’s glad for it.

Now joined with the rest of Baker Company at the final rendezvous just short of the hill up to the village, Castiel takes stock of what he can see. “Alistair, take four-platoon up to that hollow where those stables have fallen, take care there and wait for coordinates for mortars. Wallace, take two-platoon around the right flank, and I want one- and three-platoon on a fast assault up this main road – split into squads as soon as there’s cover, and I want you pepper-potting up through the streets until you find where these guys are and what they have. Report back with intel and I’ll relay orders to four-platoon. Any questions?”

“No, sir.”

They take off up the hill, Castiel following three-platoon. The angle of the slope and the way the village’s buildings are set out means that they can’t be seen by anyone inside the heart of the village until they come over the crest of the hill, so they move fast and as soon as the ground beneath their feet transforms from a dirt track to old cobbles worn smooth, they split down the middle and sprint for cover. The enemy gun thuds and thuds, and Castiel isn’t willing to wait around to

see if it's zeroing on them or on Fox Company on the other side of town; he runs.

Hester breaks three-platoon into four squads that disappear down respective narrow alleys, and Castiel follows one squad along until he finds some cover from which to assess the situation as well as potential enemy positions.

Castiel sees now what Gabriel meant on the radio. The village isn't taken up with enemy fire as a whole – there are sporadic bursts of heavy artillery fire, and a constant underlying grinding of a machine-gun, but it is usually concentrated on one area at a time, which suggests to Castiel that there aren't very many of them holding the position. There isn't enough of them to be a visceral threat with an entire Regiment parked on the road just a few miles away, but there is a strong possibility that they could report in to the German forces at Brest, and that would cause real problems, so it's not a question of retreating to Battalion for further discussion.

Part of one-platoon comes along the next road to Castiel's right, and so he moves with them along the westering road in an attempt to get closer and pin down the enemy position without coming under fire. They kick their way into a boarded-up storehouse, weave through and bust out the other side; they spill into the road and run along the length of the old stone barn towards the intersection where two-platoon was last seen. However, before they can get there, the German gun starts up its thudding rhythm, spitting out shells, and Castiel backpedals frantically, feet clumsy over each other as he tries to turn mid-sprint and go back the way he came, and he screams, "Take cover – incoming, incoming—"

The mortar hits hard ten yards or so behind Castiel, but the gun fired off three in quick succession, and the others will be coming down now. Castiel runs. He dodges left and right in a disorienting zigzag, and he throws himself down behind a low wall of sandbags jutting out from the barn wall just as the next shell comes down and peppers the stone with shrapnel. He presses back into the wall, and takes a second to catch his breath.

He can hear the kick of the mortar tripod hitting the earth in the split-second just before firing – a sharp crunching noise, as though not on cobbles but rather on broken glass – and Castiel twists on his heel to look around the edge of the building. He vaguely recalls having seen an antiques shop as they patrolled in, one heavy with glass and ceramics, with the windows blown in, and as Castiel looks out into the street he calculates what the trajectory of a shell would be from that point: it's about right.

He drops back down into a crouch and half-turns to yell down at one of one-platoon's nearby squads. "Harvelle," he shouts, pressing himself close against the wall as another mortar whistles in and slams brick and dirt up into the air. "Get me a runner!"

Harvelle calls over his shoulder, and then Private Sadowski comes sprinting across, ducked low for fear of further shellings, and nearly crashes into the building behind Castiel as he comes skidding to a halt beside him. "Sir?"

"Round the corner, building with green shutters on the left side of the road – it has a verandah with high wooden walls, you'll have good cover there," Castiel tells him, and jerks his head over to one side to indicate that the kid should lean past him to have a look. "Seen? Good - it's just short of an alley, and I need you to check it out – suspected location of enemy artillery. I'll cover you. Clear?"

Sadowski nods shakily, and Castiel has just about the presence of mind to briefly wonder whether this is his first fire-fight. Then he slaps him on the shoulder, the word *go* almost a soundless roar on his lips as another shell strikes hard, and Sadowski is off stumbling into the road. Castiel twists on his knee to follow him with the muzzle of his rifle, and then he snaps the safety and fires off ten rounds just ahead of him – counting two seconds between each shot, breathing steady – and Sadowski weaves, and he runs with his head low, and he leaps the two steps onto the opposite verandah in one quick movement, and drops down until he is hidden from view.

Castiel pulls his rifle back, finger eased off the trigger as he waits for word. Just as it seems that Sadowski is taking too long and that something must have happened to him, his face pops around one of the balustrades. With quick hands he speaks to Castiel in hand gestures – one 88 gun, two men manning it, one machine-gunner, one rifleman. Castiel gives him a curt nod by way of thank you and turns back towards first squad.

"Harvelle – on me!" he yells, and uses his hand to follow the order with a sharp gesture to the top of his head since he's aware that his voice is drowned out by the rattle of machine-gun fire and the 88s' unsteady drumbeat.

Joe comes running to crouch beside Castiel, and uses one finger to push his helmet further back on his head from where it's falling over his eyes. It's too hot to have the strap clipped under his chin, but he should be fine like this for a little while longer.

"Take this corner to lay down a base of fire on that corner – the enemy position is just behind." Castiel points out across the cobbled street. "They're just behind that house. Try to draw their fire but retreat if they come on too strong, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Harvelle yells back, and Castiel doesn't wait to see it done. He shoves himself off the back wall with one hand and takes off across the road in the direction of the rest of one-platoon, the other side of the intersection.

He runs with one hand clutching his rifle up near his chest, the other hand flattened over the top of his helmet to keep it steady as he sprints unevenly over the cobbles. He's twisted his ankle once before during an assault and he doesn't want to do it again now – especially now that he's got a hundred other things to think about, with Harvelle's squad behind and Sergeant Lafitte's squad somewhere up

ahead, and the rest of the company God only knows where along the way. He pushes himself until there is a stinging burn to his calves and thighs, and his breath is being cut out short of his chest, but he can't let up for a moment because the broken-teeth chatter of machine-gun fire is pinging off the stone and brick around him, and there is the greedy gulp and slam of the 88. He has to keep going.

Castiel veers left, taking the corner wide as he runs for where he last saw two-platoon, and he isn't sure of what happens exactly after that, except that everything has gone silent and still. The earth is gone from beneath his feet, and there is nothing but an intense vibrating hush that seems to reverberate through his entire body, and then he hits the ground with a thud.

He cracks his head hard on the concrete.

The next thing Castiel knows, he is opening his eyes to dust and blood and a searing pain all through his head. His skull seems to be bouncing irregularly – no, regularly, as it beats and beats and beats – with his pulse, he realises, and with that, he understands that he is alive. He blinks.

There was running, and there was shouting, and then he awoke on the floor. Castiel is just struggling to remember how to get his arms to move, how to prop his hands underneath him and get him up off the ground, when there is a hand grabbing fistfuls of his jacket and hauling him around to sit upright.

A voice, from far away: "Sir, can you hear me? Sir? Lieutenant, are you okay? Are you okay? Are you okay?" His voice rings like church bells inside Castiel's head, and he winces.

"I don't know…" Castiel means to finish the sentence with something, but he trails off, losing track of his train of thought. He feels that his

head is gradually wobbling right off his neck like a platter of his mother's jelly from his childhood, but with an effort, he tries to support himself, and he looks up into Dean's face. He doesn't remember a great deal of what happened, or where he is, or what's happening, but he remembers Dean.

Cool, calloused hands on his face, pulling him this way and that – there is a sharp sting to one side of his face, and Dean's hands come away decorated with small spots of blood. Dean pulls gently at his eyebrows, peers into his eyes. There are explosions, far in the distance, and Castiel wonders aloud if those are fireworks. He wonders if he's asleep, still. If he's dreaming.

"You hit your head pretty bad," Dean says, his voice dim through the daze of Castiel's understanding. "I think you're okay – I'll patch you up properly later, but I've just gotta get you someplace safe for now. Can you walk?"

"Dean," Castiel says.

"Yeah, it's me, sir. I got you. Now, come on, can you walk?"

Castiel curls his hands into Dean's webbing, and as Dean hauls him up onto his feet, small pieces come back to him. The invasion of occupied Vire. A couple of the first-platoon privates laughing at some joke. A bad taste in his mouth when he thinks about touching Dean like this – or differently – in front of the rest of the company. Maybe it's the blood on his tongue. He shoves feebly at Dean, pushes at his chest. "Let me go, Dean, I'm fine, I'm—"

He vomits onto the cobbles.

"Yeah, you're just peachy, come on." Dean wraps an arm around

Castiel's waist, and uses the free hand to first sling Castiel's arm around his neck and then to grab the front of his webbing. With Castiel supported well enough, he drags him along out of danger, and Castiel is too disoriented to do anything but go along with it.

As Castiel is hauled up and along, he is seized by the knowledge that he's in charge, he's supposed to be leading the company, and he begins to flail and fight to get out of Dean's grasp. "Let me go, I've got to – they need me, I have to—"

"Sorry, Lieutenant, you're not going anywhere," Dean says, and his voice is strangely cheery – maybe because for once he gets to boss Castiel about and can't be told off for it. "Doctor's orders. You're coming with me."

Castiel stumbles beside Dean, who shifts for a moment to adjust Castiel's arm where it slips from around his neck. Castiel tries again, his voice nearly drowned out by the sound of shells echoing off the concrete around them and bringing down the houses. "Radio… tell Virgil. He's got to – he's—"

"Don't worry, I'll tell him."

Dean doesn't take no for an answer, and wastes no time dragging him away to some small, secluded corner, where he sits Castiel carefully down, propped against the wall.

"Stay here, okay, Lieutenant?" Dean tells him. "I don't care if you're company CO or Genghis Khan reincarnate, you stay put until Battalion transport comes to evacuate you back to the convoy, alright?" He crouches down, right up close to Castiel, and reaches out for a handful of his combat jacket to get his attention. "Alright? You promise me?"

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Castiel mutters, trying to jerk away from him and nearly toppling over in the process.

“You promise me, sir,” Dean says, more firmly this time, and then his hands are on Castiel’s face, holding him steady so he can look him in the eyes. “I know you – if you get it your way, you’ll be running off back to the rest of the company the first chance you get, and you’re so concussed you’ll get blown to high heaven. And I can’t hang around here to babysit you, Lieutenant. You stay here, you stay awake, and you sit tight until the transport gets here. Okay?”

Dean’s eyes are so, so green. Castiel is staring at him – the dark ring edging his iris, the scattered flecks of brown and yellow; the slow sweep of his eyelashes when he blinks, rust-coloured and lightening towards the ends – and his mouth is open and he just says, “Dean.”

“Okay?” Dean says, more emphatically, and if he has any awareness of how this position compromises them, he doesn’t show it.

“Okay,” Castiel mumbles. Dean’s thumb skims once, just lightly, over Castiel’s cheekbone, and then his hands drop to his sides and he climbs back up onto his feet. He doesn’t say anything else, but glances back once over his shoulder as he jogs back to the front line of the assault, and that’s enough for Castiel.

With great difficulty, Castiel manages to keep his eyes open – or at least mostly open – until he sees the heavy Red-Cross-marked four-by-four rumble around the corner. As men swing out of the flatbed in his direction, Castiel lets out a breath of relief and slumps. There is exhaustion seeping through every bone in his body, and his head is pounding in a harsh, painful rhythm that makes his eyes ache, and more than anything he wants to sleep. He’s not supposed to, but he wants to sleep, and he wants Dean near him again.

He is awake and then he isn't and after several instances of sluggishly fading in and out of consciousness, Castiel blearily opens his eyes to the wide blue sky. His first thought is something along the lines of *what the fuck is this,* followed by his realisation that he's sprawled out on a stretcher in the back of the Battalion aid truck on the main road. His being held here against his well is unacceptable, and he decides to walk out right now. His legs don't follow the order, and when he rolls his head to look down at himself and see why his own limbs are being so insubordinate, his vision pitches like a ship and the urge to throw up again briefly makes itself known before settling.

"Shit," Castiel mutters.He lets his head loll back against the hard fabric, and tries to remember how the hell he ended up like this. The details are indistinct, but he remembers Dean dragging him up from the ground, and one side of his face is swollen and painful enough that he can piece it all together.

Just off the back of the truck, Castiel can see a tall figure whose face he can't see past the blurriness and a number of small yellow spots in his vision, but he recognise by the set of his shoulders and the slight curve of his long legs that it's Dean. Castiel can take that to mean that the fire-fight is over, but he can't help wondering what else could have happened while he was out of the picture.

The indistinct silhouette of Dean across the flatbed turns, and even though Castiel's vision isn't good enough to see him properly, he makes a point of looking away. His head swims and so he closes his eyes – determinedly ignoring the approach of Dean's footsteps.

However, Dean's coming over is interrupted by the sound of someone running near the outside wall of the truck, and then Inias' voice is ringing out with panic and urgency in his every word. "Where is he?"

"Sir, who are you looki—"

“Novak, Lieutenant Novak – where is he?”

“Up in the deuce-and-a-half, sir.”

Eyes closed and with his head pulsing alongside his heartbeat, Castiel’s hearing is picking up on everything - there is the sound of Dean’s footsteps hesitating over to the left, and the nervous hitch of his breath; there is Inias clambering up into the truck, and then coming to a halt.

Castiel cracks his eyes open to peer at Inias, and as soon as Inias sees that he’s neither dead nor comatose, all the fear melts from his expression, and his face splits into a broad grin. He does a good job pretending not to worry about Castiel, and for his sake, as always, Castiel plays oblivious to it. Inias makes himself popular by being light-hearted and hilarious, rather than be branded some kind of fretting mother hen; seeing that Castiel is alright now brings on a peal of laughter.

“How’s our war hero, then?” Inias teases as he crosses the last few yards to Castiel’s stretcher with more ease and nonchalance than he entered with. “Beautiful as that black eye is, babe, I don’t think it’s enough to get you home to Bedford, although I commend your efforts. Really I do.”

“Here’s some water, sir—” and suddenly Dean is there, on the other side of the stretcher to Inias, a metal mug in hand.

Castiel flinches slightly at his unexpected nearness. With his eyes lowered, Castiel takes the mug, and he can’t even bring himself to say thank you. He doesn’t want to interact with Dean in any way in front of Inias – as it is he can already see Inias glancing surreptitiously between them, and there is the hot red flush of shame up Castiel’s neck.

“Well, what do you think?” Inias asks.

Castiel looks up at him, but Inias is not speaking to him. Looking over at Dean finds him equally startled to be included.

“You think Walking Wounded here’s got enough for a Purple Heart, Winchester?”

Dean twists his mouth, teeth playing over his lower lip with the starts of a smile. “We could maybe put in a good word,” he says. “Really lay it on thick about the dangerous piece of sidewalk he was fighting in the glorious name of America.”

Castiel rolls his eyes.

“You know, for that bit of daring heroism, I bet we could recommend you for a Medal of Honour—”

“Shut up, Wallace,” Castiel tells him, and he does his best not to smile.

“I’m serious, if you hadn’t been so bold as to take out that – what was it, a concrete slab?”

“Just your average cobbled street,” Dean tells him.

“Cobbles, really? Then shit, Cas, if it wasn’t for you and the brave work you did with your giant head like a wrecking ball, we’d be

overrun by Krauts by now, I'm sure of it."

Castiel raises a hand as best he can to swat at Inias' side. "Get out of here," he grumbles, frowning. "I'm trying to get some bed-rest. Leave me alone."

"Sorry – I have to stay. Medic's orders." Inias looks over at Dean with a grin. "Right, doc?"

Dean looks delighted. "Abso-fucking-lutely."

19th August, 1944

Thankfully, Castiel is only made to stay with Battalion medical staff overnight so that his concussion can be monitored in case of brain swelling, and he is allowed back out into the real world early the next morning. It's good to be back – according to Inias, the company collectively held their breath when they saw him go down. "They like you better than they liked Milton," Inias says, clapping him on the shoulder the next time the convoy stops, as they make their way down the line of trucks to find the rest of Baker. "Let's just say they weren't happy at the thought you might be on the way out – so there."

"So there," Castiel repeats, and he quirks an eyebrow up at Inias.- although he then winces. He keeps forgetting that he's more or less wrecked half his face. He has a black eye, one eye almost swollen shut, and a fat dark bruise all across his cheekbone and temple. Needless to say, it hurts.

It's not all good news and the grief of the men thinking they'd lost Castiel, however. Since running into land-mines and that leftover

German artillery on the way past Rennes, all companies of the 116th are under orders to ensure they are all absolutely battle ready. Early each morning, before the convoy sets off, they go for two-mile runs and calisthenics; once the convoy stops around midnight, Castiel has Hester quizzing them on their drills and their weapons handling.

At first, Castiel had thought that as CO and as someone with a concussion and as someone who, in general, was a very busy man, he would be exempt. It seems Inias is in no way a believer of this theory, since he is deaf to Castiel's irate insistence that he has other more important things to be doing, and instead hauls him away by the elbow to join formation. They patrol and they do PT and they occasionally receive mail up from Regiment at the rear; they practice map-and-compass techniques and hand-to-hand combat. Honestly, Castiel feels that mostly the men would benefit from a good night's sleep.

Just before midnight, three days from Brest, the convoy stops for the night, and upon Major Singer's request, Baker Company files out onto the road to march the next six miles through Brittany in the dark with a full pack. Singer says they need to keep in shape; he says they need to be making faster progress – although, of course, they're going to have to set up a temporary harbour area tomorrow morning to await the rest of the convoy.

Castiel isn't pleased. He thinks there are a great deal more productive things they could be doing rather than wasting most of a night covering ground on foot that the trucks will be later covering anyway, but it's not in his power to complain.

They set off, haversacks pulled up high on their shoulders, and they stoop over forwards for balance as they strike out south.

For half an hour, there is silence – aside from the surreptitious whispering of men talking out of the corners of their mouths as they try to pretend they're not doing anything, and one man humming

somewhere further back towards three-platoon. Castiel isn't sure how it happens, but gradually the volume of the whispering grows – presumably from having been unchecked by an officer – until most men are talking quietly amongst themselves.

Castiel is too exhausted to tell them to shut up, but then a couple of rows ahead, he catches a glimpse of a smouldering cigarette butt. "Whoever is smoking in first squad," he says, and he raises his voice to carry: "Don't."

There is resentful muttering up at the front, and someone shoots him an irritated look over their shoulder – in the dark, Castiel can't see who it is, but he stares back unfazed.

Then Private Tran speaks up. "Isn't the singing more of a problem than a couple smokes, sir?"

Castiel frowns. "Who's singing?"

"Sergeant Lafitte, sir – Sunday, Monday, Or Always."

Castiel tilts his head slightly, considering. He's bone-tired, as must be the rest of the men, and although they are meant to be taking this patrol tactically, no-one back at Battalion ever needs to know if they take it easy. Anyway, it's not as though they're more likely to run into trouble if they're going along singing and smoking – the Germans would have to be fools to miss one-hundred men marching past in the dark and the quiet, even if they were silent. "I like that song," Castiel says, at last. "Is he any good?"

Tran laughs. "Not very, sir."

Now that Castiel has been told the song, he can hear it: Benny's slightly off-key crooning in time with the beat of their marching, and if Castiel didn't know better, he would say that somehow the sergeant has managed to get a couple men from his squad doing The Andrews Sisters' gentle *ooh's* over it.

"Ask if he does requests," Castiel says.

In front, Corporal Johnny Mills bursts out laughing. "Thought we were meant to be tactical, sir."

Castiel wrinkles his nose, and he decides to give in. "This isn't a stealth patrol, corporal. There's a hundred of us, marching in file," he tells him. "If they're here, they'll notice us either way - they can probably hear our footsteps in Italy."

"It's supposed to be real nice in Italy," Bradbury says wistfully.

Somewhere behind them, Castiel hears Gallagher make a dismissive noise. "Well, it's supposed to be real nice in France."

"Says who?"

"Lizzy Millins," Private Gallagher says, with a tone of *who else?*

There is a beat in which everyone is silent. Then Zeddmore says, "Who the fuck is Lizzy Millins?"

"My girl." Gallagher sounds offended. "Jesus, Zeddmore, you ever

listen to a word I say? Lizzy – from Slapton."

"Oh, what, Lizzy with the giant titties?"

"Nah, the other one."

"The ginger?" Zeddmore says incredulously. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

There is the dull thunk of someone getting smacked, and Castiel does his best not to smile.

One-platoon sings Bing Crosby on the road until Corporal Sorento tries to strike up White Christmas, and two-platoon tries to steer them away towards Pistol Packin' Mama, and then there is a heated argument over whether Al Dexter is alright or if he needs to ram his guitar right up where the sun doesn't shine – of which Dean Winchester can be heard emphatically fighting for the latter – and before anyone is quite sure how it happens, Baker Company have reached the rendezvous point as designated by Battalion staff, and they set up a harbour area and sentry points to await the convoy.

Some of the men nap in the remaining hours before morning; some set up hexi-cookers to heat their rations; some just start in on their coffee. A couple of men are stretched out on the dew-damp grass comparing souvenirs stolen from enemy bodies, while Corporal Lowell pulls out a pack of cards from his combat jacket and deals. Castiel sets his back against a tree trunk in the midst of the various platoons, and drops down to sit on his heels, propped against the wood. He digs into his combats for his cigarette before he remembers that he has run out, and it's with regret that he puts it back.

"I'll trade you a smoke if you've got a light," Inias says, as he comes

about from two-platoon, and he holds out his tin.

Castiel takes one. “What would I do without you?” he says around the end of it as he lights up.

“God knows,” Inias says as Castiel reaches up to offer him the cigarette he’s just lit, and swaps over for another one. “Let’s not think about that too much.”

“I think I’d make it a few days,” Castiel says. “Maybe a week, if I took care of myself.”

Inias laughs.

The sky is streaked dove-grey and lilac with dawn, and there are another few hours until the rest of the regiment will catch up. More than half of the company are sprawled out asleep in strange positions – a few are propped up against each other; many are using their haversacks as pillows – and those who aren’t can be seen desperately trying to keep themselves occupied to keep them from falling asleep. Against his will, Castiel finds himself thinking that he could be using this free time to find some quiet, isolated place to be with Dean, and then he remembers that they’re not doing that anymore. His stomach sours.

Inias flits back and forth across the company – sometimes asking Castiel if he’d rather have feet for hands or hands for feet, as is his usual standard of conversation starter; sometimes traipsing off to find someone with a more satisfactory answer; sometimes digging in Castiel’s webbing to steal some of his K-rations – and while Castiel appreciates, as ever, his light-heartedness and his dedication to making the company rounds, ensuring that everyone is happy, he’s too tired for that.

Castiel isn't antisocial – he gives a small smile when he catches the eye of any soldier, and he enjoys himself when at times a couple of the NCOs come over to strike up easy conversation – but he doesn't seek it out. He wants a nap more than anything, but as usual he's too tightly strung to get any sleep, so instead he settles for something in equal parts productive and therapeutic. He settles down cross-legged in the dirt and strips his M1 for cleaning.

His fingers are quick and steady on the catch of his sling, unthreading the rough fabric, and he is so focused on his task that it is several moments before he realises that a small crowd has amassed around and nearby him.

There is most of one-platoon within two or three yards, breaking down their rifles, their machine-guns and grenade-launchers, and even though Castiel knows, logically, that as their former platoon commander, it makes sense that they are still close to him, that they like to follow his example – it's still touching. He looks over them – Private Miller holding a lighter to his rear-sight aperture, Bradbury using his smaller hands to help Sergeant Lafitte get a clump of dried mud out of his cocking handle. There are a couple from other platoons mixed in as well, and Castiel catches sight of Private Donald Hanscum struggling to poke the pins out of the trigger mechanism housing. He lifts his head. "Hanscum," he calls, and tosses a combi-tool over.

Castiel is half-listening to the argument breaking out on the other side of one-platoon – "absolutely no fuckin' way, man – I'm telling you, if you jerk off more than ten times in a day, you will *die*" – when Dean drops down to sit beside him. Castiel does his best to pretend he hasn't noticed.

"I don't see why that would kill you," Bradbury is saying distantly. "I mean, as long as you drink a lot of water—"

“Water doesn’t have anything to do with it, dickweed, okay? Your balls just cannot produce enough—”

“Maybe yours can’t – I have balls of steel.”

“Really? Really, Charlie, ‘cause I seem to have a real good memory of you nearly crying like a little baby when Andy got you in the nustack back at Fort Blanding—”

“With a wooden pellet,” Bradbury says emphatically. “With a fucking wooden pellet – I’d like to see you take a pellet to the dick one day, alright—”

Dean jostles Castiel carefully with his elbow. “You alright, sir? You want a hand?”

Castiel gives him a hard stare. “You want to give me a hand with rifle-cleaning? You’re a medic. When was the last time you even touched a rifle?”

Dean’s look turns wicked. “Well, actually, sir—”

“Don’t answer that.”

Dean laughs, and he leans back on his hands. He doesn’t say anything for a few seconds, but Castiel can feel his eyes on the side of his face. The thought is only marginally distracting; he focuses his attention on pulling out his rifle’s spring. For one sadistic moment, he considers just letting it fly out backwards and hit Dean, but he’s a mature, sensible adult. He’s a professional. He removes it with care.

“How long d’you think until the cavalry arrives?” Dean asks conversationally.

Castiel lays the spring down on the ground alongside the other pieces he’s pulled out, each laid out in neat vertical lines, and then he shakes his sleeve away to check his watch. “It’s oh-five-forty-five – they’ll be setting off around oh-six-hundred, and then it should take them less than an hour to catch up to us. And then we’ll be moving out again.”

Dean’s face falls. “So a nice, relaxing morning, then.”

“Precisely.”

“Lieutenant Novak, sir!” Private Hanscum calls across, and tosses Castiel’s combi-tool back to him.

Castiel reaches out for it, but before he can catch it, Dean’s hand is out and he snatches it triumphantly out of the air. “Thank you, private,” he says, while he glares at Dean, who looks far too smug for Castiel’s liking. Castiel holds out his hand expectantly.

Dean toys with the combi-tool between his two index fingers, flicking the various segments open and closed. “They should have a part of this which is, like… a sleep dart.”

“Yes, they should,” Castiel says irritably, of the thought that he can already think of a good use for that, and Dean starts laughing again.

“When Sammy turned fifteen,” he starts, still grinning wide and bright

as the daylight, “I got him one of those Swiss army knives for his birthday, and you know, he loved it, he was so excited. He was really getting into camping in a big way then, so he was thinking, yeah, he’s gonna be whittling branches into like, battle-axes, and skinning wild boar and stuff. And he takes it with him everywhere – just in case! Like he thinks that somewhere in the three miles of goddamn corn-field between school and home, he’s gonna get lost or run into a grizzly bear… except all that happens instead is he gets so caught up daydreaming about turning into some kind of wild animal hunter that he doesn’t check his boot-laces and he trips up walking hope – stabs himself right in the leg. I mean, God, it was scary when it happened, but he was okay and now he’s just got this big dumb scar like – look at this permanent reminder of when you thought you were hot shit and stabbed yourself. Good going, Sam.”

“Winchester,” Castiel says. “Combi-tool?.”

Dean blinks. “What?”

“Christ. My combi-tool, Winchester. Now, please.”

“Oh, shit – yeah.” Dean hands it over, and in his defense, he does shoot Castiel this guilty little smile like he totally forgot he was holding it. Castiel is ready to be irritated with him for quite some time, except his stomach does this gravity-defiant little twist, and he very diligently does not think about kissing him. His mouth looks soft and sweet, with endearingly unbalanced with that flash of teeth, and Castiel doesn’t think about it even for a moment.

Castiel swallows, hard, and he takes back the combi-tool to get into the corners of the rear housing mechanism where dust has collected thickest. For several minutes there is blissful quiet as Castiel works, just listening to the conversations of other men nearby, which range from the quaintly domestic to the downright bizarre – and then: “Can I ask something, sir?”

Without lifting his head, Castiel says. “That depends on the question.”

Dean clears his throat. “You, uh,” he starts. “You really think that works?”

Castiel looks up to frown at him, wondering if he means the rifle – because seeing as the rifle is currently in about fifteen unattached pieces, he would hardly expect it to work, but once it’s put back together, it will do. “What?”

Dean nods at Castiel, and his eyes flash lower, to Castiel’s throat. “That.”

Castiel looks down and realises that in bending forwards to oil the various components of his rifle, his crucifix has slipped free of the collar of his shirt and is dangling visible over his T-shirt. He reaches up and tucks it away again and looks up at the rest of the platoon to see whether anyone is listening, but they all seem too occupied in their own discussions and their own tasks. Then he returns his eyes to Dean – his gaze somewhat harder now, at having his religion questioned. “Yes.”

“Really? I mean, I’m not religious, but I just—” Dean jerks his shoulders in a non-committal kind of gesture. “Do you really figure it’s gonna keep the bullets from hitting you?”

“No.” Castiel looks back at his rifle and concentrates on testing the cock handle, slicking it and checking that it slides smoothly. “I know that I’m going to get hit. This is just for hoping that it doesn’t kill me.”

“Hoping?”

Castiel shakes his head. “No offence, Winchester,” he says, “but you don’t seem the type to respond too well to a word like ‘pray’.”

Dean laughs. “Praying doesn’t work.”

Castiel lets out a short sigh. Honestly, he doesn’t know why he’s even entertaining this conversation when he knows Dean is only going to be belligerent and disrespectful. He raises his eyebrows at Dean, and just says, “Have you ever even tried?”

“I don’t need to *try* it,” Dean says. “It’s not like brussel sprouts - it’s not a new thing, or an acquired taste. Okay? I just don’t see the point in getting my knees all dirty just for all that glass-half-full eternal optimism sort of bullshit.”

Castiel doesn’t respond immediately. He focuses on working a small cloth around the end of a long cord, slips it into the mechanism-end of his rifle’s muzzle and starts pulling it through to work out any oil and round-residue. He tightens the other end of the cord around his fist and pulls it through in one smooth movement, and only then does he take the time to respond to Dean’s ignorance. He straightens up and looks right at him. “Bullshit,” Castiel repeats.

Dean shrugs like he couldn’t give a shit. “I’m sorry, sir, it’s bullshit.”

Castiel presses his lips together, a humourless laugh bubbling up in his throat. “How is it,” he says, his tone somewhere between irritation and incredulity, “that your mother could have such faith in religion, and angels, and yet you have none and look down on me for what I believe in?”

Dean's expression changes then; becomes hard and drawn and cold, and Castiel knows instantly that he shouldn't have mentioned Dean's mother.

When Dean speaks, his voice is sharp with resentment. Castiel has never heard such bitterness in his mouth, and it twists his face a little so that Castiel isn't sure he's talking to the same person anymore. "Because my mother had faith in angels," he says sharply. "And because that didn't seem to mean shit to them when they let her burn."

Castiel wants to take back his words, want to swallow them down like a mouthful of alcohol, but they're out in the air and Dean is clutching Castiel's split-second mistake tight to make him regret his moment of insensitivity.

"You ever prayed a hundred times for the same thing, over and over and over, until your voice cracks and the words don't make sense anymore? When you were younger, maybe?" Dean holds Castiel's eyes like a challenge and his lip curls up a little. Castiel has seen him angry, but he's never thought that Dean might hit him, or grab him by the lapels and shake him until his skeleton rattles, like he does now. There's something heart-breaking about it, as well - because Castiel knows that this fury is not for him, but for all the powers that have failed Dean since he was a little boy. "I didn't think so," Dean says after a moment of Castiel's silence, and he goes on to mutter, "I figure by the end of this whole thing, you'll know what that feels like, but trust me, after all that, when you've still got a big fat nothing to show for all your diligence and good faith, you'll also feel a little less praying."

Dean lets out a short, sharp breath, like a punch of air through a chest wound, and it's only then that he breaks eye contact; he pulls up one of his knees in front of him and curls his arms defensively around it, in a gesture so painfully childish that Castiel cannot help feeling that a part of Dean left him with his ability to pray, when he was too young to even know what it meant. And Castiel understands.

“My father left when I was ten years old,” Castiel announces, awkwardly, into the hush between them.

Dean’s eyes flick up to meet Castiel’s, sullen from beneath his eyelashes, but he doesn’t say anything. He waits for Castiel to go on.

Castiel tilts his chin up, looks away towards the treetops, and does nothing but breathe for a second as he tries to bring it all back. “It was the just the two of us, home alone that night - my mother had gone to visit her sister - and I remember it felt like a big deal,” he says quietly. “I remember thinking that it’d been a while since I’d had time like that with him, just him and I playing silly games, and I liked the way it felt, like the two of us against the world, without my mother telling us to wash up or keep clean or go to bed. He made me hot chocolate, and we ran out of milk.” Castiel looks down at his hands. “And he went to get some more milk. He said he didn’t want mother to know about the hot chocolate, that it’d be our little secret. And I remember that the feeling of solidarity was such that I asked if, while he was out, he could get me a Haynie’s peanut bar. He said yes, and he went out to the store, and he never came back.”

Castiel doesn’t look up, so he doesn’t know Dean’s reaction - whether he’s still angry, or sympathetic, or whether he cares at all. He can hear Dean breathing, and all he can think of it is that the sound is steady, and Castiel envies it.

“I stayed up all night,” Castiel says, and the words burst out of him. “In my head, the explanation for his lateness was that he had been unable to find a peanut bar for me, and was searching for one, because—” suddenly Castiel’s throat is thick, and he stops, swallowing hard, before he continues, “—because he didn’t want to let me down. Haynie’s went out of business the next year. The chances of a Haynies’ peanut bar being found now are slim at best, I think.”

He looks up at Dean, then, and his expression is hard in challenge of Dean's condemnation of Castiel's supposed religious ignorance. He doesn't need Dean preaching to him about how it feels to be young and helpless and convinced that if you give your all and pray very hard then God will be kind.

Dean's face has softened around the edges – the set of his jaw, the line of his mouth - but the anger is still there, albeit subdued, and Castiel has the distinct sense now that the anger is directed not at the vague notion of angels, but at Castiel himself: how dare he still believe in a God who doesn't care about him. "Then how come you're still wearing that thing?" Dean says roughly, and he uncurls one hand from around his knee to point.

Castiel follows the tip of Dean's finger down to the battered bronze crucifix still hanging out of his shirt. He wraps careful fingers around it and drums his thumb lightly against the front face of it. "I already lost one father," he says, at last. "I'm not going to lose another."

Dean doesn't say anything. After a moment, he gives a grunt of acquiescence, and that's all.

Castiel is abruptly overcome with embarrassment as he realises that he's just been ranting at length about his ridiculous personal issues – and not merely in front of Dean, which would be bad enough, but in front of the entirety of one-platoon. He glances over at them with a hot flush creeping up into his face, but as far as he can tell, no-one has been listening to him

Corporal Mills is striking up a sing-along of Hot Time In Berlin, and Zeddmore is telling some obscene, derogatory joke about the difference between a cow and a woman, while Kevin Tran and Charlie Bradbury it seems are coming up with a plot to murder Frank Sinatra for getting out of military service. Castiel ducks his head and he focuses on slotting back together all the various components of his rifle.

“I’m sorry.”

Castiel doesn’t look at Dean, but his hands become slower, less busy, as he fixes his M1, and he listens.

“I didn’t mean to – it’s none of my business, anyway.”

“You’re right, it isn’t,” Castiel says.

Dean hesitates for a second. He takes a quick, uncertain breath. “You sure there’s nothing I can do to help?” he asks, and although sometimes Castiel feels like he doesn’t know Dean at all, he knows this much – that is an extended hand. That is forgiveness and apology all in one, and that is *we are okay.* Castiel doesn’t want it.

He snaps the last pins back into place on his rifle, and he pulls it up towards his shoulder to functions-test – snapping the cock handle forwards, clicking off the action – and Dean is still looking at him. Castiel lowers his rifle and glances over at him, and he doesn’t know why he does it, because he doesn’t want to be Dean’s friend – but he says, “Pass me my rifle sling?”

Dean coils it up in one hand and passes it over. Thumb bumps finger on the plastic buckle, and for once Castiel doesn’t say anything about it. He allows the contact, and he only tells Dean off for smirking afterwards. They’re alright with one other, but there’s no need for that kind of arrogance.

20th August, 1944

They're a day away from Brest, and can already hear in the distance the dim sounds of warfare – tanks and anti-aircraft guns, naval cannons and machine-gun fire – and Castiel, in all honesty, is not looking forwards to getting there. There's a lot of hype surrounding the assault since several different divisions are all working towards capturing the city, and all want to be the first to get their foot in the door; every time Castiel speaks to the S-4 about battalion logistics, every other word seems to be complaining about the 6th Division charging in ahead and ruining everything for the VIII Corps. More concerning still is the fact that Major Everett mentioned once, off-hand, that the German forces occupying Brest have modified a series of complex anti-naval fortifications to turn inland so that they can fend off land assaults – call Castiel nervous, but he's slightly unsettled by this, and more so by the fact that he has had no indication yet from his superiors as to how they're going to surmount the supposedly insurmountable.

Castiel sleeps when he can, and eats when he remembers, and the rest of the time he studies his maps and he worries. He moves between transports so that he can sit for a while with each of his officers and most of his NCOs, wanting to talk to them about how they're feeling. If he gets any real kind of dissent from his men, then that is something he can report back to Battalion and perhaps use it to insist that the commanding officers of 2nd Battalion settle somewhere together to discuss what they're going to do. However, they must all have some small degree of the stubborn stoicism in which Castiel specialises, because with the exception of Sergeant Milligan saying that he could do with a smoother ride, no-one says a word in complaint. It's infinitely frustrating that there is nothing Castiel can do but try to be prepared.

As they trundle ever further along the winding road that turns west now through Saint-Thonan, Castiel tries to get some more work done on his maps to see which way General Middleton might direct the 116th into Brest, based on his knowledge of where the other regiments are moving.

Men jostle around him, some climbing out of the back of the truck, some climbing in, but Castiel pays no attention aside from occasionally to ask one of them to pass him something from where he'd laid out other papers on the flatbed floor or on the truck's benches. Private Miller is telling some juvenile story about high school pranks; Corporal Sorento is going to stretch his legs for a while; Sergeant Lafitte and some others are going to see if Garrigan has any of that liquor he found in Guigamp. None of it is terribly important or relevant, so Castiel doesn't care.

He follows with his finger the course of their route into Brest – up towards Plabennec and around, down to Bohars, or perhaps straight in through Guipavas. Probably not Guipavas, since intel has said that there is an airfield nearby. Then again, Castiel might have that wrong. He has a sneaking suspicion that the intel was that the German airfield was Guilers, not Guipavas, but honestly, it could be either.

"Can you hand me those notes?" Castiel asks, distractedly holding out one hand to whoever is to his right as he continues to peruse the lines and contours of his map. The back of his hand bumps against someone's chest, but is given no notepaper, and Castiel looks up to see Dean Winchester sat beside him.

Castiel blinks at him. "Winchester," he says. He realises that his hand is still lightly touching Dean's chest, and he pulls his hand back as though scalded. "What are you doing here?"

Dean grins. "Been sat here for a while, sir – only Joe and Benny and the guys just got out the back to go find Cal. What was it you were after?" In spite of his question, Dean makes no move to even look at any of the various maps and papers that Castiel has sprawled out across the floor of the deuce-and-a-half.

"My notes," Castiel says, only half sure that he's correct or that he even wants the notepaper anymore – although he is busy, and he has endless important tasks he needs to be working on, and he really

doesn't have any kind of time for Dean's type of distractions. His mouth is moving against his will. He goes on, "How long ago did the others leave?"

"Only a couple minutes ago." Dean glances at his watch. "Yeah – five, tops."

"Five minutes."

"Yeah. Why?" Dean's grin spreads wider, and he cocks an eyebrow at Castiel. "What, sir – you worried they're gonna get suspicious of us?"

"No," Castiel says automatically.

"You think five minutes alone together in the back of a truck means the whole VIII Corps knows—"

"There's nothing to know," Castiel snaps, dropping his voice almost to a whisper, but his heart is already beating fast with the fear of it. He and Dean are sat so near one another that they're sharing the same body heat. It's a chilly day for August, the air rain-damp with a brisk wind that stirs the flaps of fabric that cover the back of the deuce-and-a-halves, and even from this small distance, Dean feels warm.

He puts his hand on Castiel's thigh.

Castiel is taken aback, to say the least. He flinches slightly from the touch, warm and unexpected, and for a moment, he can only stare, caught on the way Dean's fingers shift a little over the inside seam of Castiel's combat pants. He swallows, and his eyes flick up to Dean's face, where Dean is looking at him as though he's waiting for

something – permission, maybe, or rebuking. His eyes are wide with uncertainty, but the want is clear in his slack, open mouth, the shallow way he breathes. His thumb starts up grazing over the fabric of Castiel's pants.

Castiel can't remember the words for the fact that they're not supposed to be doing this. His chest is tight as he struggles with it, and he can already feel that he's half-hard, and there's this insistent urge to move. He wants to bring himself further forwards on the bench so that he can lean back, spread his legs for better access, because Dean's hand is close but nowhere near enough, and he wants Dean's hand on him like he means it. He is just staring at Dean with his own mouth fallen open now, eyes trailing over Dean's mouth and throat and jaw, and then as Dean's hand tightens to lightly drag his nails over Castiel's pants, he remembers: "Don't."

With great difficulty, Castiel drags his gaze up to meet Dean's eyes, and his breath snags in his throat because Dean has his teeth playing at his lower lip and he's looking at Castiel's mouth. Dean wants to kiss him, and not in the gentle, romantic way of gentlemen and sweet blonde dames at the end of nice movies – he wants to bite at him and lick and suck and scratch until Castiel has neat dark marks along his throat; he wants to push him down and straddle him and rock their hips together hard.

Castiel doesn't realise that he hasn't said anything in a long time until Dean says, "Lieutenant?" and as though in slow-motion there is the flash of his tongue on the *L,* the narrowing of his lips, the click of tongue on teeth for *ten.* His hand is still on Castiel's thigh, his thumb still skating dangerously close to his cock, where Castiel can feel a dull heat pulsing for attention, and he exhales raggedly.

"Don't," he says, because it's the only word he remembers, and he shifts his hips forwards to push Dean's hand up closer until his thumb is over his balls.

“Push my hand away,” Dean says. His voice is low and rough. “Push my hand away and I’ll stop right now and I’ll never—”

Castiel puts a hand over the top of Dean’s, and Dean becomes silent instantly. He stares at Castiel with apprehension for the first time, and Castiel thinks it says something about how weak he’s been that Dean expects now that he has poor self-control and won’t be able to make Dean stop. Castiel has excellent self-control; he can make Dean stop anytime he wants to. He just – doesn’t want to.

With his hand over Dean’s, Castiel slides their hands up together over his cock.

Castiel makes this soft, punched-out sound without meaning to, and his head falls back against the side of the truck with a hollow bang, but he doesn’t care when he’s guiding Dean’s hand to rub over his cock through his pants. His hips shift up into the touch – even this poor friction is the best thing he’s felt in weeks – and he tilts his head over sideways for the heat of Dean’s mouth at the same time, because sue him for being a fairy but it just doesn’t feel the same without it. However, before he can crush his lips to Dean’s, there is a flamboyant rat-a-tat on the metal of the truck outside.

Castiel shoves Dean away hard enough that he crashes into a crate of ammunition, and Castiel sits aside for a second, raking his hands through his hair. Breathe. Breathe. There’s still wild heat spiking in his belly and he wants nothing better than to crawl back over to Dean for more, but he can’t – he was an idiot, an *idiot.*

“Lieutenant Novak, sir – the Captain’s after you!” Sergeant Milligan exclaims from outside.

Castiel takes a deep breath. “Which one?”

“Laufeyson, sir.”

“I’ll be there in a minute. Thank you, sergeant.” He rubs a hand down over his face – realises it’s a gesture he’s stolen from Dean, in his moments of annoyance and disbelief – and then jerks quickly to his feet to rearrange his clothes.

“Lieutenant,” Dean says from behind him, his voice strained and almost sounding guilty, but Castiel doesn’t even give them the satisfaction of turning around. He pushes open the flap at the back of the flatbed and drops down into the road.

The convoy is only moving slowly now, as the road is socked in with mud, so it’s relatively easy for Castiel to walk along the trucks to find the one in which Gabriel Laufeyson is travelling. He holds his rifle tightly in both hands, as though maybe keeping a close grip on his military professionalism like that will keep him from unravelling, and he marches fast through the mud and the puddles.

He passes Lieutenant Virgil in one truck, who raises one hand in a lazy wave, and Inias in another, who calls out to him and is ignored.

“Hey, Cas,” Inias tries again, and then twists where he’s sat at the back of his truck to follow him when Castiel gives him no response but to duck his head down and stomp away faster. “What the hell’s up with you?”

“Nothing,” Castiel says irritably as he goes past.

Inias huffs out his breath. “Christ. Well, do me a favour – tell nothing he needs to back off!”

Castiel doesn't answer that. He doesn't say he doesn't want him to. He doesn't say he has this itch under his skin that he can't scratch and he thinks all he needs is to go back to that truck and press up against Dean like the rest of the world doesn't exist. He tells himself he's just tired, and that if he could get some rest and maybe a chance to work off some of this excess energy and frustration by himself, everything would be fine.

He finds Captain Laufeyson sitting on the back edge of a deuce-and-a-half, his legs swinging down while he eats something dark and slimy out of a rations pack. Behind him, one of his NCOs is sleeping where they are propped against a large crate. As Gabriel sees him approach, he declares, "Novak! Just the man I was after."

"You wanted to see me?" Castiel asks. He shakes his head when Gabriel briefly extends a hand to offer him a pull up into the truck if he wants, and instead he walks along just behind it. He feels better for keeping his legs moving; it means that his blood is pumping, not getting distracted as it reaches his dick with Castiel's thoughts occasionally flitting back unbidden to the shape of Dean's mouth as he breathed ragged with want.

"I'm staging a mutiny," Gabriel says, and he stretches out his legs where they dangle between the truck's back tyres. "No more night marches. I don't know about your guys, but mine can't take it – or, they can, but they shouldn't. They don't need to work up to being fighting fit, they've been on the front line every battle since Omaha. I'd be impressed if somehow any one of 'em slacked off enough to get outta shape."

Castiel nods. It's not exactly the disagreement he would prefer to have with Battalion staff, but it'll do. "Baker Company are much the same."

"It's official, then. Next time we pull up, I'm heading to the back, I'm

telling Singer what I think. You with me?"

"If it means I don't have to march tonight, then yes, I'm with you," Castiel says, and he can already feel the relief in his spine at the idea of a good night's sleep before they get close enough to Brest that every moment, awake or otherwise, is sharply penetrated by gunfire and shrapnel.

It doesn't go well. The convoy pulls over around noon to allow for drivers alternating, and to give commanding officers time to catch up and discuss; this is the point at which Castiel and Gabriel head down the line to find Major Singer. The major, as it turns out, is busy talking to Lieutenant Naomi, and couldn't really give a rat's ass what they think about the night marches. He yells at Castiel, who is the first to speak up and so gets the brunt of his irritation, and he yells at Gabriel, for being associated, and it is only when Naomi chips in to agree that his men are exhausted from the night marches as well that he begrudgingly relents.

"Fine, don't do it, then," Singer says. "If you're all outta shape and can't keep up with the assault, that's on you."

Castiel wants to tell him that such a situation seems extremely unlikely, but he keeps quiet. He has this pulse of anger underneath his skin, building up from mere annoyance, that he has not felt in a long time. He holds his hands at his sides in loose fists – clenching them tight would only be admission to his being angry, and he is calm.

"I'll be sure to keep you in mind, then sir," Castiel says, and he gives a curt nod to indicate that he has said all he needs to say, and he stares straight at a point just above Major Singer's head while he waits to be dismissed. It's not the first time he's been dressed down by one of his superiors, but it still stings.

After lunch, everyone is called back into the trucks to continue the motor march, and as Castiel heads to the main road to find Inias somewhere amongst the convoy, he goes past Dean.

"Sir!" Dean exclaims, catching sight of him, and he hurries ahead from where he was walking with his friends from one-platoon; Castiel walks faster. "Sir, I just wanted to say something to you real quickly about earlier—"

"Not now, Winchester," Castiel says sharply, and he shoots a warning look over his shoulder at him as he makes his way down the convoy. Castiel can hear Corporal Harvelle and the others who witnessed the rejection laughing behind him, but thankfully, Dean has stopped following him.

Castiel climbs up into the deuce-and-a-half where he finds Inias, and without a word of explanation, he drops his head onto Inias' shoulder. He doesn't need to explain. Inias reaches up to slip an arm around him.

They stop that night in a small village just past the outskirts of Morlaix which has been more or less decimated by enemy artillery fire, and Castiel hopes they haven't chosen this establishment for the 2nd Battalion as an act of faith – lightning never striking the same place twice. A few buildings that are away from the main square still stand: an old hotel, a few rows of houses, a church, with a narrow yard long over-grown with nettles and prickly sow thistle that twist up alongside the shattered tombstones.

Castiel ushers his platoons along towards the main square to be sorted by various Battalion staff, executive officers, and company NCOs, so that they can be fed and suitably equipped for the rest of the trip. He removes his helmet and rubs a hand through his hair, conscious as ever that it is too long and growing shaggy without attention, and that's when Castiel sees Dean on the other side of the intersection.

Around him, the other medics are moving equipment from one truck to another, and Castiel doesn't know if Dean is meant to be helping or simply supervising, but he stands at the side of the road with his arms folded across his chest. He is looking at Castiel, his expression set in a way that seems calculatedly vacant, and yes, it must be so, because as Castiel watches, Dean's eyes flicker down over Castiel's torso, his legs, then up again. Castiel shifts his weight from one foot to the other, and the motion must somehow alert Dean to the fact that Castiel has noticed him, because their eyes meet across the intersection.

Castiel looks away, into the distance, and with an open mouth he takes a deep breath. He does his best not to recall the dark and hungry way Dean had looked at him in the back of the truck. He steadies himself, and he moves to find Battalion CP, where he left his haversack upon dismounting from the convoy. He should see how Inias is doing. He should check on the men. He should sort out what the hell he is going to do with one-hundred men attacking a very large, very well-defended coastal fortress.

As he heads down the south road to find where he last left Inias, out of nowhere it seems there is a replacement soldier, one Private Hickling, who jogs to fall into step with him. "Lieutenant Novak, sir?"

"Yes, private?" Castiel says, and although he tells himself, *don't be irritable, don't be irritable*, because it isn't Private Hickling's fault that Dean Winchester is ruining his life, he hears his words come out sharp and disgruntled.

"I was just wondering if there was any chance I could be on the first assault team for Brest," Hickling says breathlessly. "It's just that—"

"Hickling, we haven't even got to Brest yet," Castiel tells him without breaking step. Some of these replacements are ludicrously over-excited at the prospect of getting into battle, and more than half of

them are trigger-happy and accident-prone when they get there, and in complete truthfulness, he's more than slightly tired of them.

"I know that, sir, it's just—" Hickling skips one step slightly so as to hurry faster alongside Castiel. "It's just I want to get into the action early, you know, and—"

"Ask me again when we get there," Castiel says, and he veers off to the right down a wide cobbled street that, if memory serves him correctly, runs down to the main road. He has gone approximately five paces before he runs into another replacement.

"Sorry, sir, I was just wondering – do you know where the boulangerie is? I was told to meet there at twenty-three-hundred-hours and it's just —"

The kid is small and skinny, with blonde hair, and Castiel doesn't even know his name, but he knows that there is no way on God's green earth that he is over eighteen years old. And he wants to be directed to a goddamn bakery. Castiel thinks, *I have never been here before. I am as new to this town as you are. I do not have a psychic understanding of every civilian establishment north of the Mediterranean.* Out loud, he says, "Try First Sergeant Masters. He can direct you towards a map."

The replacement drops away as he goes running back down the street to find Masters. Castiel breathes a sigh of relief, turns the corner, and comes face to face with Lieutenant Hester, who stands directly in front of him with hands on his hips.

"Hester," Castiel says, his tone flat with exasperation, and when Hester frowns at Castiel's lack of enthusiasm and general jadedness, he takes a deep breath and tries again. "How can I help you?"

“Novak,” Hester starts. “I’ve just had word from Major Campbell about company-wide calisthenics scheduled tonight – he said I should talk to you about it, and I have to say, I’m not sure it’s the best way forward when the men are so—”

Castiel holds his hands up in surrender. “Slow down, Hester. What calisthenics?”

“I was hoping you could tell me, actually. Why the hell is Campbell putting Baker on calisthenics tonight?”

Shit. Castiel should have known. With dread sinking low in his chest, he just stares at Hester. “Did he say anything about Fox or Able?” Surely the same thing would have happened to Gabriel and Lieutenant Naomi, then.

Hester shakes his head. “As far as I can tell, it’s just us.”

“Right.” Castiel exhales through his teeth. God, but one day he’d like to tell Samuel Campbell exactly what he thinks. He can’t comprehend what it is, precisely, that makes Campbell despise him, but he knows he wants it to stop. He can’t do that directly, however; he needs to speak to Gabriel. “Do you know where Fox Company CP is stationed?”

Hester points. “On the other side of the village. Virgil said it was set up between the old hotel and the terraced housing block – alongside that garden we saw on the way in.”

“Thank you.” Castiel replies, and sets off immediately.

“Castiel!” Hester calls after him, outraged. “Aren’t you going to—”

“I’m working on it!”

He swings his rifle sling over his shoulder and lets it hang behind him, and he lets Virgil know on his way past the main square where he’s going and that he’ll be back shortly, and otherwise he takes the quickest route there. Getting his haversack from Battalion CP can wait.

There is the garden, and there is the hotel, and there is a narrow alley stretching out beside it. He pulls his rifle sling up higher onto his shoulder and makes in that direction. However, in spite of all Castiel’s proficiency at maps and navigation, he somehow manages to get lost.

Castiel frowns up at the buildings on either side of the alley. Of the two, one is more rubble than wall, not leaving a great deal of room for Fox’s commanding officers to inhabit, unless they were somehow to burrow underneath the collapsed brickwork; however, having already walked the length of this alley, Castiel knows that the building on the other side is empty.

He runs over Lieutenant Hester’s words in his head again: last door on the left between the old hotel and the terraced housing block. Well, he’s between the hotel and the houses, and he’s tracked the length of this alley twice now. He turns to re-trace his steps – maybe he missed something, and just needs to look more closely – and there, at the end of the alley, is Dean.

For a moment, the sight of him makes Castiel jump, and then as he relaxes, he gives an irritated sigh. “Christ, Winchester.” He eyes Dean as he begins to approach, calculating that Dean must have seen Castiel come this way and trailed him – or worse still, deliberately gone around so as to cut him off, and Castiel isn’t sure whether or not to be unsettled by that. With a sharp raise of his eyebrows, he says, “Are we following each other now?”

Dean shrugs, but he doesn't take his eyes off Castiel, and he is taking quick, decisive steps forwards. "Can do," he says conversationally, and he is within yards of Castiel, walking faster now. His gaze is heavy, heated.

"Winchester," Castiel says, and he means it like a warning, but somehow that isn't how it sounds – when he speaks, Dean's name is a hot rush of air, like a sound of wanting – and Dean doesn't slow for a second until he is crashing into Castiel, and his hands are taking handfuls of the front of Castiel's jacket to haul him in. He kisses him hard enough that they stumble back two steps, and Castiel brings up his hands to push Dean away but he gets as far as his palms on Dean's collarbone and then he just finds himself holding on. Dean is hot and frantic, his tongue slick over Castiel's as he finds his way in, and Castiel's hands slide up to Dean's shoulder, squeezing tight enough to leave marks, as Dean sucks at his bottom lip, bites; he noses Castiel's chin up to mouth at his pulse-point, and Castiel grunts and pulls away.

"We're not doing this," he says, using his grip on Dean's shoulders to hold him at arms' length, but any attempt at authority in his voice is undermined by his breathlessness, and somehow his hands are then moving of their own accord to Dean's waist, fumbling with his belt buckle, the button of his combat pants. He's supposed to be going to find Gabriel. He's on his way to Fox Company and he's busy and they're not supposed to be like this anymore.

"Doing what?" Dean mutters distractedly, with his eyes fixed on Castiel's lower lip, and he struggles to get Castiel's combat jacket unzipped, his rifle clanking at his shoulder as it gets knocked, and then Dean shoves his hands under Castiel's shirt to skate up his sides with cold fingers and scraping fingernails.

"We're not – we're—" Castiel can't get the words out, and he is unceremoniously shoving a hand down the front of Dean's combat pants before he knows what he's doing, and Dean covers the small noise he makes by pressing up against Castiel and kissing him

breathless. Castiel tries again, says, “We’re not doing this,” against his mouth, and one hand comes up to clutch at Dean’s hair.

“We should probably not do this—” Dean gets out roughly as Castiel grabs a handful of his cock down the front of his pants and jerks it once with a long, slow twist, “—*shit* – fuck, somewhere a little less—”

Castiel pulls his hand out of Dean’s pants – determinedly ignoring as he does so the way that Dean’s body curves after him, a calling to come back – and uses that hand on Dean’s chest to push him away. Dean blinks at him, startled and disoriented, and his mouth falls slightly open as Castiel walks away down the alley.

However, Castiel is not leaving – as much as he knows he should, that he needs to get as far away from Dean Winchester as possible and never again think about the green of his eyes and the breadth of his shoulders – but rather heads a few paces away to where the wooden back door of some house is hanging off one hinge. He pulls the door open, nearly tearing it off its remaining hinge as he does so, and he stands aside for Dean.

“Get in,” he says, his voice hoarse, and he doesn’t look up to see Dean’s expression at the moment he realises that Castiel isn’t leaving him like this after all. Castiel glances back over his shoulder as he holds the door open, in spite of it being nearly torn off the wall altogether.

Castiel drops his M1 to lean against a wall, throws off his helmet to clatter on the ground, and once Dean has stumbled in, Castiel is in after him, hands fisted in the front of his shirt and dragging him in close.

Everything is a rush, blind grabbing and fumbling, and then before Castiel can say another word, Dean is shoving him backwards,

following him so closely that there is never more than a few inches between them. Castiel's back hits the wall with a thud that sends flakes of brick-dust fluttering down on around them, and Dean crushes his mouth into Castiel's. He licks hotly into his mouth, presses against him chest to thighs, and with his teeth on Castiel's lower lip, he rolls his body forwards against him.

Castiel's hips stutter, and he reaches out to grab Dean's hips, his thumbs tracing the hard line of his hipbones, and hold him close as he pushes back. His cock is achingly hard, and he can feel Dean through his thin underwear where Castiel had pulled his pants open. Dean's hands slide up Castiel's sides tantalisingly slowly compared to the desperate heat of their mouths together, and Castiel grinds forwards impatiently against him; Dean sweeps one hand up to cup the side of his throat, and then his fingers slip lower for a moment, and Castiel only understand what Dean is going for when he uses a loose grip on Castiel's crucifix to pull him closer.

Jesus Christ, what is wrong with him? There is a hot flash of shame all through Castiel's body and he jerks back – the movement pulling the cross out of Dean's hand. He snaps, "Don't," before he goes back in to kiss Dean again, and Dean doesn't argue. He lets go of the crucifix.

Dean moves his hands instead to grab handfuls of Castiel's shirt and drag him in as close as possible until there's no space between them, but Castiel is conscious of his crucifix now. He can feel the weight of it on his collarbone, and it is heating up under his clothes so that he can't ignore it. Instead he clings tighter to Dean's hips, bites at Dean's mouth until he makes this low, animal sound in the back of his throat and pushes his leg between Castiel's – and in the wake of the answering flare of heat up from the base of Castiel's spine at how much Dean wants him, he forgets.

Castiel pitches his hips up against him and there's a brief sparking moment where the friction is right and it spikes hot in his stomach, but it's only a moment and then it's just the almost chafing frustration of the fabric of Dean's combats – so Castiel rolls his hips to find it again, and again, and Dean makes a low noise of want against

Castiel's jaw and it's so hot Castiel feels like he can't breathe. He feels like he's losing his mind.

He shifts his feet, spreads his legs wider for better access, and he grinds forwards, and it's better, just barely, but he needs more. He thrusts against Dean's hip, and he can feel the hot slide of Dean's cock against his thigh, and he wants to fit his legs around Dean and fuck down onto him, but he doesn't know how to say it – and as it is, he's clenching his jaw to keep quiet, pressing his lips tight together because with every touch he can feel this tiny, sharp noise in his throat. He doesn't trust himself to speak, and so instead he relinquishes his grip on Dean's hips to bring his hands up, grab handfuls of his T-shirt and jerk at it, as he tries to silently explain, *I want you on the floor, I want us sprawled together like we were in the dirt at that sentry, I want to feel all of you against me and i want you to move like you're doing the worst possible things to me.*

Dean pulls back, and his mouth is flushed pink and swollen. Castiel says, "Dean," on an exhale without meaning to, as he tries to pull Dean downwards via the grip on is clothes. Then Castiel realises that Dean has misunderstood – he drops to his knees. "Wait – you – what are you—"

As Castiel struggles to get the words out, Dean works Castiel's pants open, and he glances up with his eyebrows raised as if challenging Castiel to say he doesn't want Dean to – and Castiel hates that somehow Dean knows him this well because he wants him to, he wants him to, but he feels ruined enough with Dean having ever touched him like that, and he doesn't know what will happen if he takes this next step. Castiel's stomach pitches nervously, and his lips part with the thought that he'll say *no, stop,* in spite of the way he's trembling at the knees with how badly he wants to see Dean like that. It turns out to be irrelevant either way because Dean leans in, licks over the head of Castiel's cock, and this shuddering noise is pulled out of his mouth – and like that, with his chest heaving for breath and this flare of desire lit up low in his body, Castiel knows he could never make Dean stop now.

His mouth is warm and soft, and without thinking a low groan tears itself from Castiel's throat, and his head falls back against the wall. He tilts his chin up, open-mouthed, and focuses on trying to breathe steady while Dean moves. Castiel doesn't know enough about sex like this to judge what Dean's doing, but his tongue is quick and hot, and each time he pulls back slightly, there is this roar of want all through Castiel that makes him want to slam back into Dean's mouth, and it's all he can do to hold still. The feeling is worse each time, the pressure building, and Castiel doesn't realise that he's shaking, his whole body wracked with fine tremors, until Dean's brings one of his hands up to lay across Castiel's hips and hold him steady.

Castiel swallows hard, and he closes his eyes. He wonders if he can hold Dean's head, but the idea sets off a fresh rush of heat underneath his skin and from experience he figures that means it's bad and not allowed. He balls his hands into fists, sets them against the wall either side of him on the crumbling brick, and he breathes. In, and out. In, and – Dean licks up the underside of Castiel's cock, his tongue catching underneath the head, and Castiel is suddenly all at once dragging in this ragged gasp and snapping his hips forwards for more.

He wants to apologise but he can't think of the words, except Dean has his hands on Castiel's thighs now, instead of his hips, and when Dean closes his lips around Castiel's cock again he can't help himself and he is thrusting forwards is shallow jerks. He feels out of control, like he's spiralling. He has his mouth tightly shut but he can hear himself making these small noises in the back of his throat, like a low whine, and Dean's fingers are digging tight into Castiel's thighs while Castiel fucks into Dean's mouth faster and faster. He wants to speak to him, wants to say *Dean* and *please* and *yes, god, yes, yes*, but he keeps his mouth shut and he breathes hard through his nose while he's feels like he's breaking apart, and then out of nowhere it hits him, white-hot and powerful, and he makes this short, desperate noise on an exhale and he comes.

Dean pulls off with a small retching noise before Castiel is finished, and as Castiel gasps and trembles and spills his last onto the concrete floor, Dean spits out a mouthful of come alongside him. "Jesus, that's disgusting," he mutters, and he pulls a face. Castiel can't really

complain – he supposes this is a side-effect of taking up with a normal boy – and so he just leans back against the wall, breathing slowly as he comes down. He thinks he should probably ask if Dean is alright, but he doesn't know if he can speak right now and wouldn't trust his voice even if he could.

His heartbeat seems deafening, and he closes his eyes. Without looking, he fumbles to put himself away and do up his combats, and then while his eyes are closed, he is being kissed.

Castiel opens his eyes, alarmed, and he snaps his head back, because the last thing he wants right now is a taste of his own goddamn come, and he gets the words out, "What the hell, Winchester?" before he realises what is happening.

Dean makes a low, rough noise, and without the kiss, he turns his face into the side of Castiel's neck, leaning on him heavily as he jerks himself quickly. The way he's positioned, Castiel can't see what he's doing, but his body shifts in small movements that grow incrementally more forceful, less coordinated, as he gets close, and Dean opens his mouth to breathe ragged against Castiel's throat.

Castiel isn't quite sure of the etiquette – is he supposed to help? does Dean want Castiel to touch him somehow? – and so he simply stands completely still. Dean drops his head, pushes his forehead hard into Castiel's collarbone and he makes this shaky noise that tails off into a groan – and then he judders once, a slow shiver that traces the length of his spine in a long arch, and he is still.

Dean only tried to kiss Castiel because they were still, technically, within the parameters of a sexual encounter. That's fine. Castiel isn't shaken by it, he was just confused and astonished, but everything makes sense – Dean wanted to come, and maybe he needs some kind of physical intimacy for that. That's understandable.

After several moments, Dean lifts his head, and there is this strange softness to his look that makes Castiel's blood run cold, especially when they are still pressed close enough together that they are breathing the same air. Dean's eyes flit down to Castiel's mouth.

"Are you done?" Castiel says brusquely – anything to shatter the unsettling quiet between them – and he rolls his shoulders backwards to indicate that Dean needs to step off and give him some space. Dean does, with a slowness to his step that almost seems reluctant, and for a second he just watches as Castiel sets about tucking his shirt back in and zipping his combat jacket. It makes Castiel uncomfortable; he squints at Dean. "What?"

"Nothing," Dean says, and his voice is hoarse.

"Nothing," Castiel repeats back to him. "That's right."

Dean doesn't say anything to that – he doesn't argue, which is good, but he doesn't agree either, and he simply continues to look at Castiel. His eyes are quiet and gentle, and there is a touch of sadness. Castiel doesn't want to call it pity, but even after he brushes off his clothes and goes to find Fox Company CP as originally planned, there is something about that look that digs its claws deep into Castiel's brain and does not let go.

22nd August, 1944

It is time to go on foot. The convoy takes them around the western side of Brest, ready to move down to Fort Montbarey with the rest of the 29th Infantry Division, plus a few companies of the British Royal Tank Corps. They'll have air support from the British, and there are additional armoured and infantry divisions on the other side of the

city, so at least the Germans won't be focused all their effort on the men of the 116th. That doesn't mean Castiel isn't afraid.

They are close enough to the first German fortifications that there is a threat of shellings and sniper-fire, and so Castiel is making absolutely certain that Baker Company is taking this seriously. As they run down from the battalion convoy, the men keep their heads ducked low and they spread out in a wide arrowhead to preserve them from bursts of fire, and Baker's various platoon leaders and NCOs are working furiously to keep everyone simultaneously close and concentrated on their actions whilst holding them at a far enough distance to protect them.

Their objective for the night is a collection of woodland just short of L'Arc'hantel, from where they can lay down a base of fire in case of an attack from Fort Montbarey, and where a harbour area can be set up for the later days of the siege. The trees should protect them in some small part from mortar fire, and according to the maps, there is a slight swell in the landscape prior to the woodland so that even Fort Montbarey, on its hill, doesn't have a direct line of sight.

They're two miles from their objective when the Fort Montbarey guns fire their firsts.

"Keep going," Castiel yells until his voice cracks. "Keep moving up!"

The sound of the heavy artillery is different to the Howitzers they're used to in the field; these are heavy-duty anti-naval and anti-aircraft guns, designed to tear clean holes in the side of a battleship, and they scream like fury as they come over. One minute there was no sign of them and the next the sky was torn in half with the sound and the shaking, and then the earth is torn up with colossal clouds of thick black smoke and loose dirt, and the impact jars out the knees of every man within a hundred yards. However, there's nowhere to take cover in these open fields, and to try to find cover in the rows of short crops would be insanity – there's nothing but to keep moving until a better

option comes about.

Castiel slows to a jog in spite of the adrenaline coursing through his blood that roars at him to go faster, to sprint until his muscles can't go any further – because he needs to be at the back. He needs to make sure that everyone gets through this, or as close to everyone as he can get.

"Alistair, Wallace, take them around," he shouts, his hand sweeping across in a long motion to indicate a small road south-east, but he is drowned out by an artillery shell coming home, and he is thrown to the ground. A dull pain makes itself known in his injured shoulder as he lands hard in the dirt, but thankfully, this time, when his head bounces, he has his helmet strap tightly fastened. He wriggles up onto his elbows and tilts onto one side to yell again. "Take them around—"

He catches sight of Private Hickling. There is a shard of shrapnel through his throat, another through his arm. He twists feebly, kicks once, and Castiel's breath snags in his throat.

He rolls up onto his feet and runs, keeping low, until he gets to Hickling, ready to call *medic, medic* until the word loses all meaning, but Hickling is dead by the time Castiel gets there. Ignoring the hot slick of blood, Castiel fishes under the collar of his combat T-shirt for his dog-tags and snaps off one of the two, digs through his pockets for letters, maps, intel – and then he is gone. It would be impossible to try and get his body out of here right now, but maybe Battalion staff can come back for him later.

Castiel shoves everything into the breast pocket of his combat jacket and climbs up onto his feet to sprint back up to the front line.

Baker loses two other men on the way in – Lance Corporal Vautin from four-platoon, and Private Drew – but they make it to their

objective position in good time. The shells keep coming down even once they make it to L'Arc'hantel, but they're sporadic now and there is time in between each shellacking to dig in and start creating fortifications of their own to get them through the night.

Castiel radios in to the other 2nd Battalion COs to confirm that they all got into position alright, and that in general their battalion is in the right position for the assault ahead, while Gallagher crouching patiently at his side, holding the radio steady with one hand while the other rummages through his webbing for something.

"—our central position on the south-west map stands at 351-277, running along north by north-west," Castiel says to Major Isaacs, the mouthpiece tucked against his shoulder to keep his hands free while he studies the map. "Our northern-most sentry point extends to meet Able at approximately 352-277 and—"

A shell comes over and Castiel cringes down, pressing himself briefly against Gallagher's radio-case. In the distance, Sergeant Masters is yelling for everyone to take cover, but it strikes further down the line near three-platoon, until there is another one, slightly closer, and another one. The nearest hits within ten yards of Castiel and Gallagher, unprotected by Gallagher's unfinished foxhole, and a deadly-sharp combination of shrapnel and tree-burst peppers the dirt nearby.

Once the barrage is over, Castiel untangles himself from the radio and lifts the mouthpiece again. "Come in, Dog-Six-Item, this is Baker-Six-Nan – Baker receiving intermittent mortar fire, do you read me? Over."

Major Isaacs' response is garbled, hurried, and in the instant that follows, the Montbarey guns start up again. Gallagher drops his webbing, apparently giving up on whatever he was searching for in the pockets, and twists to adjust the radio settings to allow Isaacs to come through more clearly, and then there is a deafening crack, and

everything happens too quickly for Castiel to comprehend, but there is a spray of something hot and wet across Castiel's face, and Private Gallagher is kneeling in front of him with his jaw hanging loose from one hinge.

Castiel is motionless, crouching in the dirt. His mouth slack as he stares, and he feels a slow, wet trickle down the bridge of his nose, down onto his cheek, into his mouth. Blood, he realises. Castiel struggles to breathe.

"Medic," he says, and his voice is a hoarse whisper.

Andy Gallagher stares at him, eyes wide, and his throat works uselessly as he tries to speak. There is a slow red spill of blood down his neck and chest. Castiel wonders what he is trying to say – to call for a medic, or to swear blue murder that he can't believe he's been hit. Some of the men call for their wives. Some for their mothers. Castiel wills him to get the words out. *Say it*, he thinks as he stares back at the mangled disfigurement that consumes half of Gallagher's face. *Your girlfriend – what is her name? Say it.*

"Pull back from the tree-line!" Hester is screaming. "Pull back, bring your scrapings back—" and Virgil is hollering about snipers, and everything is a mad scramble backwards to get out of the sniper's sights. The word *medic* is ringing out in a hoarse yell nearby, again and again.

Slowly, Gallagher puts a hand to his face, and as it comes away bloody, his knees give out and he falls. Castiel reels backwards, and he has no idea where he is, what he's doing, but his head is spinning and he feels he could vomit – he throws out a hand sideways to steady himself, and instead of finding something solid like a wall or a tree or a truck like he had hoped, on which to support himself, someone catches his arm.

“Easy, sir,” Dean’s voice comes, low and reassuring in its unflinching calm. “I got this. Get down, stay low, you gotta keep moving—”

Castiel nods wildly, his vision still whirling out of control, but he takes deep breaths as Dean moves past him to treat Gallagher, and Castiel gets to his feet to staggers forwards. He makes it three steps before his knees buckle and he falls gracelessly to sit with his legs twisted beneath him.

There is absolute roaring chaos as Baker pulls back from the front-line and into better cover, abandoning whatever small shell-scrapings and fortifications they had built in favour of the cover of trees further back. Castiel sits on the ground.

He has no concept of how long he is there – it could be mere milliseconds or it could be eons before a hand snags his elbow and hauls him up onto his feet to get back.

“Jesus, Cas, come on!” Inias is yelling, as Castiel trips over a tree-root, and there is overhead the thunder of another series of shells coming down. Inias drops down into the ground in an abandoned shell-scraping that someone in the company had recently given up trying to dig, and they curl together in dirt and try not to die.

“Inias,” Castiel tries to say, and he can’t find any other word to say. He feels like his throat is closing up. He feels like he can’t breathe.

“You can’t do that, okay?” Inias yells at him over the whistle and crash of the shells. “You can’t just – stop, or sit there, or shut down, or whatever the fuck that was, alright – Jesus Christ, I thought something terrible had happened. You can’t—”

Castiel nods shakily, and he swallows around the fear in his throat,

and once the shells have stopped, he lets Inias pull him up and this time he runs after him without needed to be dragged like a useless thing.

Eventually, against all expectations, the shelling does stop.

The men crawl out of whatever cover they've found and begin again with digging foxholes and shell-scrapings in which to sleep, and Castiel is seized by the realisation that he doesn't know what happened to Dean once he ran up to the front line to get Gallagher to safety.

Castiel reaches out for Sergeant Masters' sleeve as he goes past on his way to check that everyone's alright, and he holds him still for a moment. "Where's Winchester?" he says, and he keeps his voice carefully flat so as not to let the panic through.

"He's fine, sir," Master says. "He took Gallagher off the front-line and got him to the back – du Mort and a couple others have set up a temporary aid-station for him and the others."

"The others," Castiel echoes.

Sergeant Masters lists a few names, and Castiel is listening but the names go straight through him. He doesn't remember. He just nods, and then he lets go of Masters' sleeve to let him walk away.

At around twenty-one-hundred hours, Castiel tells the company to settle down for an early night – with the exception of those on sentry duty and holding the tree-line – because they are all going to need as much rest as they can get. Castiel doesn't follow his own orders. He calls in to the other COs again to see how the line is doing; he checks the maps and he checks them again; he starts up notes for his casualty

report, his assault report, his equipment and ammunition report; he eats some dinner when Inias comes over and kicks his boot.

"You need some sleep," Inias says, at four different points that night.

"I will later," Castiel says, one of the three times – along with *not tired* and *don't want to* and *don't need to,* and just once, he almost says, *I don't think I can.* He doesn't let that one slip out, though. Inias doesn't need to know that Castiel is so shaken by the image of Gallagher's torn face playing over and over in his mind that he can't stop being busy for a moment – Inias has his own problems to worry about.

After a few hours of hanging around Castiel and pretending not to be concerned, Inias heads off to get some sleep for himself, and Castiel is left alone. That suits Castiel just fine. He has so much he needs to do – honestly, he doesn't have time for sleep.

He looks over his reports, and he walks over to Battalion to hand them in, and he drinks some water from his canteen, and he brushes his teeth. He watches a German flare launch itself into the sky and cast the entire world into a strange, flickering light that casts silvery shadows from the trees; on the other side of Brest, fire starts up again. The flare takes seven minutes to fall according to Castiel's watch, and by then it is only coming up to midnight. Castiel devises a new sentry rota, and he writes out every name in the company on a slip of paper to see if any platoons need to be re-arranged, and he checks the maps one last time to be certain.

The minute hand of Castiel's watch ticks slowly over into the next hour, and he finds himself sitting on the ground, knees pulled up in front of him, with one hand curled around his crucifix. He has no idea has long he's been like that, or what he is looking at, or what he is even thinking. All he knows is that there are footsteps coming up to one side that crack twigs underneath heavy boots, and then one of the Baker men is standing just to his right.

“You stargazing, sir?” Dean asks.

“Something like that.”

For a moment they are silent, Dean standing over him, and then Dean says, “Mind if I sit?” and drops down to sit immediately afterwards, without waiting for an answer. “God. This isn’t exactly comfy.”

Castiel looks over at him. “What are you still doing up?” he asks.

“I was sitting up with Gallagher for a while,” Dean says, with a small shrug. “He was on a lot of morphine but he was drifting in and out for a couple hours. I mean, everything’s pretty confusing for him right now, so I figured it wouldn’t hurt to have someone talking shit to him. Keeping things normal.”

Castiel lets out a long, slow breath. He palms off his helmet and looks at it for a second as he turns it in his hands. He still has a bullet lodged in the front from D-Day, but that seems years away. Castiel finds himself speaking without meaning to – saying the things he was supposed to keep silent.

“The people we lost today, the people we—” Castiel falters. He swallows, passes a hand over the back of his head. “They were good men. They didn’t deserve that.”

“I don’t think anyone deserves that,” Dean says lightly, and as though far away from himself Castiel thinks that’s unusual, that most of the men in Baker would probably say the Germans deserved it, and the Japanese, too.

Once again, Castiel is almost taken aback at the realisation that Dean is not as hard and coarse as he acts – that he is gentle in spite of everything. Castiel doesn't have the time or the spare thought processing space to acknowledge this, however – he is still caught on the ragged bloody hinge of Gallagher's jaw, the spray of his teeth, and he says, "And the ones we didn't lose, Jesus. Gallagher—"

He is struck by the sense of blasphemy, a guilty pang in his stomach, because he uses the Lord's name in vain with some frequency, he must admit, but alongside Andy Gallagher's name it feels like a new brand of heresy. Listen to me, Lord, and listen to the lives you have ruined beyond repair. Gallagher. Gallagher. With his chin split and half his face destroyed, with the blood spurting dark and hot down his chest – where were you when he needed protection? How will your infinite love serve him now?

The careful touch of Dean's fingers to the back of Castiel's knuckles jars him from his reverie, and when he looks up into Dean's face, Castiel realises that he is shaking. He is one clenched so tightly around his crucifix that he can feel the bronze digging into his skin. It is Dean's touch, not the cross, that grounds him.

Dean doesn't speak, and so instead Castiel says, in a rush, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be saying this to you. It's unprofessional, and you have enough to think about as it is. You must be busy. Forgive me."

At that, Dean gives a short laugh, but there is concern underlying it rather than mocking. "I'm not busy, sir. Relax."

"Relax? Dean, I – Winchester—" Castiel's words get tangled in his throat, and he can't how he is supposed to speak to Dean. He can barely remember if he is an officer or a Catholic, or if the two can co-exist, or if he's something else alongside. He is having trouble with breathing normally, and he recalls, *fear is deadly, fear is destructive,*

and so for several moments he is silent. He breathes in and out.

Dean's hand is still on his, a warm and comforting weight. They sit together, still and in silence, for a long time before either of them speak, and Castiel is there trying to make sense of the things – of the worry and the panic – that spin around near-constantly inside his head. The patrol to the bunker. The march south. The siege on Brest. The other officers, and the NCOs below, asking him what to do.

Castiel hesitates. "Can I ask you a question? Not as a soldier, or my medic, but as a—" He won't say the word *friend;* they aren't friends. They aren't. "—a person."

"Go for it."

"Do you think it ever gets easier?" Castiel asks, and as hard as he tries to sound nonchalant, he can hear how pathetic his voice is, as it straddles some line between hopeful and sad. "Does it ever start to feel like it doesn't matter?"

For a moment, Dean is quiet. He looks down at his hands. Then, at last, he says, "I don't know," and Castiel fights the urge to roll his eyes – trust Dean to have a bullshit answer, the first time Castiel has asked him something important. Dean exhales through his teeth, puffing out his cheeks. "Maybe you get used to it." He shrugs. "Maybe you pretend you do."

Castiel sighs. "That sounds exhausting." He looks over at Dean, and finds him surprisingly unaffected by this discussion. Castiel doesn't know exactly what he expected – for Dean to cry or tear his hair out or lament about how war is hell – but he just twists his mouth slightly and looks awkward. Castiel raises his eyebrows. "You don't get this?"

Dean jerks his shoulders loosely, a non-committal shrug. “I’m on the other side.”

Dean doesn’t clarify what he means, but Castiel understands perfectly, and his heart sinks. Dean doesn’t get men killed like Castiel does. Dean just comes in afterwards to save them. His conscience is clean. Castiel looks away. “Of course.”

He has this dull ache in his chest, so like his shoulder sometimes that he thinks he must have taken shrapnel in the past few days, but he’s whole. He’s just heavy.

“Winchester, I don’t know what I’m doing,” Castiel admits quietly. Without thinking, his fingers go to his throat, and down under the collar of his shirt to find his crucifix. He shouldn’t be saying any of this and he certainly shouldn’t be saying it to Dean, but it’s coming in a rush, in a whisper. “I don’t know if I’m making the right decisions. If I’m on the right path. I mean – I’m supposed to be guided, but I don’t even know if…” He trails off, realising that he has the cross in his hand, and he looks down. He can’t bring himself to finish the sentence.

Dean frowns. “What are you saying?”

Castiel shakes his head, and he looks up and away to his left. The night is cold and black, with the stars scarcely visible for the light pollution of Brest up in flames where bombs have caught wood. The moon is a pale sliver behind misting clouds.

In his peripheral vision, Castiel sees Dean glance down at the crucifix where it hangs just outside his shirt, bumping alongside his dog-tags – and he must understand what is wrong, because he scoffs. “Come on now, sir. You don’t mean that.”

Castiel lets out a rough breath. “Winchester, don’t—”

“Now, I might not much set much stock in the Almighty, but I’d say you’re doing okay!” Dean exclaims, and he claps a hand to Castiel’s shoulder. “All the way from Project Neptune and nothing worse than a piece of metal in your back – for real, someone must be looking out for you.”

Castiel looks at him. “You mean besides you and Lieutenant Wallace?”

Dean laughs, but he pushes at Castiel’s arm. “I’m serious, sir.”

“A lot of people have made it this far without a scratch, Winchester. Then again, a lot haven’t. Maybe I am being looked after but – I don’t understand why.” Castiel’s brow furrows, and his hand comes up to play with the crucifix again. He turns it over, and over. “Is it just because of this? Am I supposed to believe that I’ve made it this far because I pray, and say *our Father who art in heaven* – and Gallagher’s going to be in hospital for the rest of his life, because he didn’t?”

Dean opens his mouth to speak, but Castiel doesn’t give him time. He’s opened something that he can’t shut up, and the words are pouring out of him like a tidal wave of all the fear he’s kept tamped down since he first set foot on French soil.

“Gallagher will never speak again,” Castiel says, and it’s on loop at the back of his head. The ragged jaw, the red burst, teeth clinking on the sidewalk. “He’ll probably never be able to eat on his own, he won’t be able to – he won’t – and why, because he wasn’t baptised? Is that all it is?”

“I don’t think you’re meant to analyse it, sir,” Dean says softly, but his tone is thick with concern now.

“If someone is looking out for me, then why can’t He look out for everyone else? I – I *liked* Gallagher,” Castiel bursts out, and there is the truth of it. It hasn’t been him yet, but it was people he cared about instead.

It could be him next – or, more likely, more people that he cares for. He tries not to think too much about the men under his command, and does his best not to get attached to the replacements especially, but some of these soldiers he’s been with since Fort Blanding, and he can’t wrap his head around a world where they can be simply cut out of it without a second thought. It could be Sergeant Masters next, or Lieutenant Virgil, or Captain Laufeyson. It could be Inias.

“I liked Gallagher, and – Private Vautin, Private Drew – Sergeant Barnes? Corporal Doe? I mean, if that’s how it works, then it isn’t fair, and I don’t think I should be – I don’t think—” Castiel swallows hard, fighting the sense that he could throw up. He can’t get the words out that he wants to say. He knows what he means, but if he doesn’t say them, then they aren’t real, and something of his old Catholic schoolboy fear and reverence is keeping him silent. “I can’t – if the Lord only looks after his own, Dean, I don’t want to—”

“Sir,” Dean interrupts. “This is about Brest.”

Castiel looks away from him. He pulls his hand free of Dean’s and curls it tight against his own stomach, and he sits like that for several moments in silence, struggling for words. He feels like he’s struggling for air.

He unzips a pocket of his combat jacket and fishes around inside for his cigarette tin, and with shaking fingers Castiel gets one out and

lights up instead of answering Dean. Castiel takes a long pull, and holds it, his lips pressed into a thin line. He lets the smoke fill him up, hot and stinging in his throat and lungs. He exhales slowly between his teeth, smoke stuttering out unevenly as he breathes.

"Sir," Dean tries again, and Castiel cuts across him.

"It's going to be worse than anything we've done before," he says. He looks down at the red ember of his cigarette. "The people we lost at Vire, at Grandcamp and Saint Lo—" and he's shaking his head because he has the names printed inside his head, swirling around behind his eyelids every time he stops for a single second to think or plan or rest: Dobbs, Corbett, Rourke, Campbell. Richards, Spruce, Abernathy, Chambers. "It's going to be worse, bigger and more difficult and more dangerous, and we've already – Jesus, we've already – we're at two-thirds strength already, and we're going to lose more, and it's going to be on me. It's on me – who they are, how many, how we lose them. All on me, and I feel like. Like there's maybe some trick to keeping everyone safe and sound, and I just haven't figured it out yet. Like perhaps I'm just not trying hard enough."

Dean doesn't say anything, and Castiel bursts out with a laugh. The sound of it is so sharp and humourless, so foreign in his mouth, that it makes him feel like he could throw up.

"Like I'm not trying hard enough," he says again, and he's got his mouth open in this strange grin almost ear-to-ear, but he's shaking and his breath is coming out unsteady through his teeth. "You hear that? When I'm giving this everything, and I'm still not good enough."

Dean still doesn't speak. He just looks at Castiel with this expression of something strained and sad and hopeless, and he waits.

Castiel clamps down on that unsettling smile, clenches his jaw hard enough that it hurts, and he looks down at the ground. He takes a long drag on his cigarette, lets it out in a quick burst, takes another one. “I feel like a fraud,” he mutters.

“A fraud,” Dean echoes, and he doesn’t say anything further, but his tone makes his incredulity clear enough.

“Any day now they’re going to realise that Ant Milton made the wrong choice, and that they never should’ve let me have the company. That anyone else on earth would have done a better job. That they’ll decide, *enough is enough* and get rid of me. And honestly, I wish they would. Because I have no idea what I’m doing. I don’t know how to do this, and I don’t know if anyone’s looking out for any of us and I—” Castiel ducks his head, chin tucked his chest, and scratches roughly at his hairline with the hand not holding his cigarette. He lets out a long, slow breath. “I – I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“You gotta tell someone, right?” Dean says.

Castiel raises his eyes without lifting his head, and fixes Dean with a hard look. “Not you.”

Dean rocks back in his seat, his look mildly affronted. “Why not me?”

“You’re—” Castiel starts without thinking of how he’ll finish the sentence, and he cuts himself off as he realises that he doesn’t where this is going.

Dean is what – his colleague? His subordinate? Someone he secretly fucks every once in a while when stress and fear get stoked up too high? Castiel sets his cigarette back to his lips and inhales, buying time. You’re unpredictable. You’re dangerous. You’re someone I

already tell too much. You're the only one who always seems to have the answers, and I don't want to depend on you for that. You're too steady and solid for me not to end up leaning on you.

He says, "You're a liability."

Dean is silent for a few seconds, and Castiel doesn't look at him, but as he looks out through the dark towards the orange lights of Brest, he can feel Dean's eyes on him.

After a moment, Dean simply says, "Is that so?" and his voice is soft. He doesn't sound hurt, like Castiel expected – just resigned. He stands up, and takes a second to dust off his combat pants, front and back. "Well, Lieutenant, I'm happy to be a liability any time you need it, and you know where to find me if you do. And if it's any consolation at all, sir—" Dean hesitates. He clears his throat. "Well, I don't have faith in much, but I've got faith in you. So."

There is a rush of something painful through Castiel's chest, like his ribs are being crushed, and most of the air in his lungs is punched out in a sharp burst, and he wants to say something. He has a thousand words trapped in his throat and he doesn't know where to begin, and he's afraid that if he says anything he'll say too much. His relationship with Dean is something of a tightrope-walk, and at the moment he has never felt more unbalanced. He doesn't say anything. He just stares out at Brest in the distance and he smokes.

Dean takes a halting step closer. He reaches out a hand to Castiel which hovers uncertainly for a moment in the air between them, just short of Castiel's shoulder. Then, at last, it lands, and he squeezes. "You're gonna do fine, sweetheart," he says. "You always do."

Castiel swallows around a thickness that rises in the back of his throat, and all he can do in response is to give a jerky nod. His cigarette

twitches in his mouth, loosely held between his lips, and he thinks he swap it for Dean's mouth. He could crush it underfoot, go to Dean, and kiss him until Brest is no more than a bad dream. He wouldn't have to worry about the lives of a hundred men if he had Dean's hands in his hair, on his hips. With Dean, he could be light-hearted. He could be content.

"I'm gonna turn in," Dean says, after several moments of that heavy silence. He gives a slight nod of his head backwards towards where his platoon is stationed. "It's getting late. You gonna be okay out here?"

"I'll be fine." Castiel's voice is hoarse. He can't think of anything else to tell Dean, and he won't admit even to himself that he's searching for a reason to make Dean come back.

Dean gives another nod, and he says quietly something like *goodnight*, his voice partially obscured by the sound of distant naval shelling, and then he goes to walk away.

"Winchester—"

Dean stops, half-turns back towards him.

Castiel doesn't know how to say *stay*. His mouth works itself into a tight line for a second. Then, at last: "I – I could do with a coffee."

"Coffee?"

Castiel nods.

It's too dark and Dean is too far for Castiel to be able to see anything of Dean's face, but when he next speaks, his voice is gentler still. "Sure thing. I can do coffee." He sounds like he might be smiling.

Chapter 9: Brest: Le Conquet

Chapter Notes

> in terms of warnings, I just want to mention that there's some gore, some biphobia, and some mentions of dissociation in this chapter!

23rd August, 1944

Dear Sam,

I won't be able to write regularly right now 'cause there's some pretty heavy shit going at the moment – so not a lot in the way of free time, and even less in the way of peace and quiet. Although, somehow it kind of seems good – is that screwed up? I mean, I know we're about to get into the worst of it, proper, and we're losing a couple guys a day and any one of us could be next, so obviously it's not exactly a blissful summer's day at the county fair, but we had a long enough, dull enough time of it hauling ass for two-hundred miles in the back of a truck, so this kind of feels natural now. Like a few weeks off the job got my hands itching to fix something. Still, I know not everyone's like that. Lieutenant Novak is having a hard time. He's holding on okay at the moment, but lately there's a few times he gets the thousand-yard stare, you know? Just slips right out of the here and now, and Christ only knows what he's thinking, but I wouldn't wanna fill his shoes even for an afternoon. Johnny's a bit of asshole at the moment, too – he's worried 'cause he keeps having these nightmares where he gets his legs blown off or something, and that then his girl doesn't wanna marry him anymore. I don't know.

Look. Don't sweat it about dad, seriously. I mean – technically, he's not wrong, right? I'm not a soldier. And I'm not a doctor either. So I guess you could say you're both right, and before you get on your high horse again, I'm not defending him. I'm not doing whatever it is you always seem to think I do, rolling over or whatever. I just don't wanna cause a fight for no reason. You guys argue enough as it is without me adding fuel to the fire by getting offended by the dumb drunk shit he says. Forget it, for real.

Anyway, I'm gonna move on from that now. What did Jess think of her birthday present? How was your nice night? She better have been super grateful for all the thought that went into it – God knows I was starting to get sick of hearing about it. It'd be great if one day you could go see the real deal – I did a little asking around, and Benny's real into art as well (I know, right? I was surprised too) and apparently there's an actual garden? Like, obviously I guessed that Monet painted a garden somewhere with all the flowers and shit, but I didn't know it was all one garden. But it's in France! Nowhere near me, which sucks, 'cause I thought maybe I could go have a look and tell you about it, but apparently it's up near Paris. Hey – maybe we'll clear it out for you sometime soon, get all those pesky Germans out, and you two can go. That'd be nice, huh? I'll put it on my to-do list. Right after 'decapitate Mr. Hitler'.

Right, I gotta go, I'm running out of space here, but I'll write again real soon, whenever I get the time. Take care of yourself and say hi to Jess for me. And DON'T say anything to dad, you promise me? Alright. I'll see you later. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

27th August, 1944

The 88 kicks, and then there is a low whistle overhead. “Hold the line,” Castiel yells, voice cracked and raw over the smoke and the noise. Somewhere further down the line, the shell tears through the trees, and the following explosion is a hurricane of dirt and metal. Castiel flinches to the side, jarring his shoulder into a tree, but he throws out a hand to steady himself. “Hold your positions, don't fall back – hold!”

He hauls himself onto his feet and sets off running down the line in

search of Lieutenant Alistair for a status report on his light artillery platoon, but the next blast comes a little close, knocks him off balance. It sends him veering left and bouncing off a sharply-splintered tree, but Castiel comes straight back. He weaves and ducks, and a mortar kicks up dirt two feet from left side – he flinches away, hands up to cover his head, but the shells keep striking and striking, and Castiel knows he's going to die. His brain maps out artillery trajectories, the way they progress in a line, and he can't duck back, he can't outrun, he just has to swerve left or right and pray he's picked the right side.

Up ahead, there is a shallow foxhole half-dug and abandoned, and Castiel makes for it. He pushes himself until the muscles in his legs burn and ankles wobbles beneath him with the exertion, and he mutters to himself as he stumbles – *grant, O Lord, thy protection, and in protection, thy strength, and in thy strength* – and he staggers into the foxhole. Drops to his knees, half-rolls and crashes into the dirt wall, and the hard edge of his helmet bites into the side of his head.

“Fuck,” he gasps out – that's going to bruise beautifully – and then he twists around to peer over the edge of his foxhole. He can see men nearby flinching into their cover as they hold through the latest barrage, and there is no sign of Alistair anywhere. He must be further along their hedgerow, but Castiel doesn't dare move yet to go find him. He flattens a hand over the top of his helmet, clings the cold metal of his rifle.

Machine-gun fire rattles out alongside the shelling, quick white flashes lighting up the enemy position in the next hedgerow, and there is a red spray as one of the replacement private goes down heavily; Castiel can hear Corporal Quentin swear at the top of his lungs. Castiel takes a deep breath, and he drags himself out of the foxhole.

They only got attached to the rest of the 29th Infantry thirty-six hours ago, but they're already well into their assault on the terrain to the north-west of Brest - and it's already a living nightmare. The 116th are in with the main attack force, and they're along the right-flank towards Plouzané and the 175th, with a couple artillery and armoured

companies along side for heavy support, but otherwise, Castiel has little idea what they're actually doing. He understand their objectives on an order-by-order basis, without a great deal of knowledge as to how it fits into everything else – he just hopes they're doing the right thing.

Castiel goes running through the trees again in search of Lieutenant Alistair, his head ducked low. He finds him at the far end of the line, pressed up against the trunk of a tree, his head carefully tilted away from the jagged edges of tree-burst, and when he sees Castiel he tilts his head up. “Few things I love like a good old-fashioned shellacking,” he calls over the noise.

Castiel drops into a crouch. “Alistair, we got a couple good shots in and exposed the main body of their infantry – I want you to take your men around to the right to set up mortars outside of their main line of sight – set them up on that section of hedges just there, quarter-right of axis – seen? That's where their main concentration is and I want it gone. Any questions?”

“No, sir,” Alistair says, and he gets up to hustle his men along down the line.

For a moment, Castiel takes his place of cover behind the shattered tree, and he peers out across the field between them and the German position – a hundred yards at most, and it feels like a goddamn ocean. He gives himself five seconds to breathe, counting them down with his fingers drumming against the machine housing of his rifle, and then he sets off back down the line.

“Platoon leaders on me,” he shouts as the next shell comes roaring in. The concussion waves judder up through his legs until his bones feel fit to shake apart, but he keeps going. There's a faint cry starting up behind him that builds into a sob, into a scream, but Castiel doesn't slow down to think about who got hit. He ducks under a low-hanging branch, slides down into a foxhole and out of the other side – slapping

an encouraging hand to someone's shoulder as he passes them – and then moves again to find Inias, whose platoon is closest.

“Cas?” Inias has a smear of dirt and blood across one cheek. His helmet has been peppered.

“You and Hester take your platoons, cut across their left flank and set up a base of fire from the next hedgerow along, past that old farmhouse – seen? Good. You draw their fire, or you keep their heads down. Alistair's taking four to play mortars from the right, so you've got to keep them covered long enough to take out their machine-gunner concentration.” The guns on the far side pound and pound, and a tree less than ten feet from Castiel and Inias explodes into lethal splinters.

Castiel drops his head instinctively, hand up to hold his helmet steady, and he's glad he did – he feels something hit the top of his head hard enough that it knocks him back, and only Inias' hand lunging to grab a handful of his combat jacket keeps him from toppling backwards into a nearby foxhole.

“Shit,” Inias gasps, and he drags Castiel back upright. “You okay?”

“I think so,” Castiel says, but he doesn't dare take his helmet off to assess the damage. He does his best to shake off the shock of being hit. “I'm not dead yet. Are you alright to update Hester on orders? I'll keep Virgil and one-platoon on suppressive fire from here.”

“Will do,” Inias says, as he restores his expression from panic and worry to his usual cool professionalism, and he uses the hand on Castiel's jacket to slap him hard on the shoulder before he takes off.

Castiel inhales deeply to steady himself. He tries not to think about

the state of his helmet, and he goes across to where Baker's platoons are dispersing to take control of the situation. Inias and Hester are moving up to get the Germans' heads down and cover four-platoon, but the Germans aren't taking the bait – they turn their weapons on the mortar-men moving up in pepper-pot formation across the fields, and even as Castiel watches, two men go down, one after the other. Castiel's stomach jolts with something so close to nausea that he feels weak, and he tries without success to identify the injured men – or bodies – and then there is Dean.

He comes running, taking leaps and long strides over the unevenly-tilled earth, and in what seems like seconds he is knelt at someone's side – pulling lengths of gauze from one pocket, his blood-red hands glinting in the afternoon light.

Castiel tears his eyes away from him and heads back along the line to find a radioman. He tugs at Private Spangler's radio mouthpiece and calls for the CO of one of the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalions. “Perimeter breach at dog red – heavy enemy artillery on the move. This is Baker-Six-Nan requesting armoured covering fire at three six niner two zero, triple three six two. Repeat, this is--”

“Incoming!”

Castiel drops the radio, presses himself flat against the dirt. He squeezes his eyes tightly shut as the earth seems to buck and pitch beneath him, and he feels the familiar urge for his crucifix, to say *not me please not me*, but it catches in his chest and he says it differently this time. *Not any of them.Not me, but not them either.* The dirt rains down on his head and hands, and he clenches his fingers into the soil.

When it's over – for now, at least, because he knows it won't be over for a long time yet – he reaches for the radio again to find his request already rogered, and so he pushes it back at Spangler with a quick thank you before he's on his way again. Castiel crawls up to the tree-line and lies where the embankment swells up in front of their

position. Two- and three-platoon are making steady progress over on one flank, and four-platoon have at last got into some cover at their position. Castiel can hear the hiss and clang of the mortars jolting with every shot, and he might be imagining it, but he thinks that there is a slight give in the German line.

Castiel pulls off his helmet – a sharp pain shooting through the top of his skull as he does so, at which he winces – and he flips it over to see the damage. He is met by the sight of a long splinter of wood, about an inch thick, buried deep into the top of his helmet. He pulls it out smoothly, grimacing as the length of it becomes apparent, then at the blood daubing the sharp tip. Castiel tosses it away, wipes a hand over the top of his head where he can feel a slow spread of wetness, and puts his helmet back on. Thank the Lord for small mercies, he supposes.

In the distance, he catches sight of Dean sprinting – skidding to a halt by their other medic, Ted du Mort. Castiel frowns, because what the hell is he doing having two medics in the same place, but he only has time to open his mouth, ready to hell, before Dean passes something over and takes off again, back towards Baker's hedgerow. He's coming this way.

Castiel slaps his helmet back on, wriggles down from the embankment, and gets to his feet. He's so irritated by Dean's carelessness – what if both of the company's medics had been hit by one shell, and just like that, the company had no medical support? - that he forgets for a moment that he's doing his best to avoid Dean.

He lunges for Dean's arm as he comes past. “Winchester, I better not ever see you pulling that--”

Dean brushes him off, yelling, “Little busy right now, sir!” and then he's gone.

Castiel stares after him for a second, and as his annoyance rises up over him, he remembers that he's not supposed to be talking to Dean anyway. Dean is a distraction and a liability, and Castiel doesn't need him, and this arrogance, this assumption that simply because he's a crucial member of Baker with an urgent job to do means that he can get anyway with anything – that just further proves Castiel's point. He grits his teeth, and comes up to the tree-line to watch over the attack.

Then the air is ripped in two by the building sound of a freight train overhead. Castiel leans forwards to yell, “Pull back! Pull back--” and then the first of the 644th Tank Destroyer's shells hit the German line. The upwards blast of smoke and metal and rubble is higher than the trees, and Castiel feels the impact through his knees. The next one hits, and another, and Castiel uses his hand on the tree at his side to push himself off and start running.

“Get ready,” he yells as he goes, dodging through the trees to get as close as possible to each of his men's positions without tripping over them. “They might counter-attack, get yourselves ready to move!”

The shells obliterate the German line, take out the main infantry concentration, and within six minutes by Castiel's watch, he is calling off the 644 and sending his men in to clear out the position.

“Virgil, move up, I want one-platoon in all-round defensive watching for reinforcements,” Castiel calls down the line as he climbs the embankment and follows three-platoon's proven route to where they are still laying down a heavy base of fire. “Hester, get a squad in there with TNT, I want those guns disabled – Spangler, radio in to four-platoon to pull back to our hedgerow and await further orders.”

Castiel follows three-platoon in, hanging back as they move through the position, checking for enemy soldiers still alive. He does keep his rifle in his shoulder as he slowly traces the line of the German hedgerow, peering into foxholes. He nudges aside an abandoned machine-gun tripod as something white catches his eye – maybe a

map. He stoops to retrieve it, but only finds a personal letter. It's addressed *mein Liebling,* and Castiel has enough of a rudimentary understanding of German to understand what that means.

Hester is behind him, the next he knows, and saying peremptorily, “You know, we can't keep expecting the 644 to always bail us out of bad situations.”

Castiel doesn't turn around. He flips the letter in his hands, once, then again. There is a blood thumbprint on the crisp paper. “I know that, but if they're there, then I'm going to use them.” He glances back over his shoulder to see Hester's expression sour. “No sense in getting half the company killed on an infantry run a destroyer could've done in ten minutes.”

Hester grumbles something to himself, but Castiel isn't paying attention. He runs his fingertip over the blood whorls of the German letter, and then lays it back under the tripod. He sets off along the embankment, careful not to slip on the loose soil.

Ahead, there is a small explosion, followed by a clattering, as Hester's men take out the 88s. Castiel palms his helmet off, head sweaty and damp, and he moves to run a hand through his hair – it comes back dark and blood-stained.

“Holy crap, sir, what the hell happened to you?” Castiel hears from nearby, and he turns to see Private Pond staring at him with wide eyes.

Castiel summons the last reserves of his energy to offer them a tired smile, or at least something close. He doesn't need them worrying about him, and so he puts his helmet back on in spite of the way that blood and sweat has congealed on the inside. “I'm fine, private.”

Beside Pond, Jesse Turner laughs out loud, rocking back a step. “You head-butt a Kraut to death, sir?”

“See, I knew the lieutenant was hard like that.”

“Fuck off, no way--”

“Come on, guys, look at his helmet,” Private Hanscum says as he rummages through the pockets of a nearby enemy body. “He just got peppered, same as everyone else. You alright though, sir?”

“Still in one piece, at least,” Castiel says distractedly, looking away as Ash Lowell comes over with an armful of papers.

“Found these behind the main gun, sir,” Ash says. “Looks like reports, some drawings – maybe of a attack parameters, I don't know. I thought they might be useful.”

Castiel licks a fingertip and starts to flip through the various sheafs. “Thank you, corporal. If you've cleared the position, have your men formed up and moved to next hedgerow to check casualties and equipment. Send a runner back to Lieutenant Virgil for him to move up as well.”

Some of the papers look very useful – the diagram definitely depicts enemy movement through the Conquet Peninsula, which is good news since Castiel has heard from Gabriel and Major Isaacs that the 5th Rangers are currently running into some trouble south by the naval batteries. Castiel scratches at the side of his neck, where he has a bug-bite.

“Medical report, sir,” Dean says. He stands with one hand in his pocket, and the other thrusts a grubby slip of paper at him. “We lost Gillings – direct mortar hit was a dud, but it crushed his chest. We also got Johnny Mills with a dislocated shoulder, so he'll need to come off the line, and a couple guys with shrapnel and tree-burst wounds. They're on the list.”

“Great.” Castiel takes it without looking at it, gives it a quick once-over, and then tucks it into his pocket.

Dean hovers at Castiel's side, shifting from foot to foot. “Sir?”

Castiel looks up, irritated. “What do you want? I said thank you.”

“Actually, you said 'great', but--”

“Winchester.”

“Sir, didn't you have to say something to me earlier?” Dean asks. “I think I was running a little busy, then, but--”

“No, I didn't,” Castiel interrupts, even though it is blatantly untrue. He doesn't want to have that argument with Dean – because an argument is undoubtedly what it will be, as Dean will refuse to see reason and bicker and push at Castiel until he snaps, and Castiel can't be bother with it, especially seeing as he doesn't want to be talking to Dean at all. “Don't you have something else to be doing? Because I know I do,” he says pointedly, and he returns his attention to his map. He has nothing further to say to Dean, and after a couple seconds, Dean seems to grasp that, and so he huffs and wanders off towards his friends in one-platoon.

Only once Castiel is sure that Dean is gone does he look up after him, and he reluctantly spends a moment watching the slope of his broad shoulders, the way he tilts as he walks, the the way his combat pants fall over the backs of his thighs. Castiel squints, and he looks at his map again.

30th August, 1944

Another day, another goddamn hedgerow, and Castiel doesn't think he'd be wrong to say that Baker Company is sick of the way the French countryside is set out. They're pushing towards a German battery at La Trinité, which they need to take out to enable the 175th to come around from Plouzané and progress into Brest, but the land mostly rural, and, as in Normandy, cut into strips by long hedgerows atop dirt embankments, behind which the Germans like to tuck themselves away.

Castiel has already recognised from previous experience that once the enemy is comfortable behind their hedgerow, it is more or less impossible to get them out via any other means but sitting tight, chipping away at them day by day, until there are so few men left on the other side that Baker can get through without too much of a fight. However, until they get to that point, where many days' hard fighting has left the enemy position vulnerable and easily overpowered, it's brutal, it's dusty, and it usually feels like anything but progress.

The men are all exhausted, and Castiel doesn't have the energy to keep them trying new things. For now, the enemy seem to have stopped shelling them, and Castiel isn't in a position where he wants to risk that – he's happy for the men to have a moment where they don't have to worry about being killed.

He walks the line, checking foxhole cover and equipment, talking to NCOs as he comes past to make sure that everything is under control.

First Sergeant Masters makes a catty comment, as usual, to the point that Castiel can't tell whether or not it's a joke; Private Tran offers him a cup of coffee, which he politely declines. It's too warm for hot drinks right now. He keeps walking along.

“What's next, Novak?” Hester asks as Castiel comes past, and then, with a grin: “Are we not getting help from the 644?”

Castiel doesn't even bother answering. Since they're now out of reach of the division's light artillery and tank destroyer battalions, Hester has not let up about Castiel's previous use of them. He seems to think that Castiel has got Baker reliant on having artillery support – although, of course, that isn't the root of the problem. The real issue is that Hester thinks he could do a better job of commanding Baker. Castiel would like to see him try.

He pulls his helmet off and pushes back his hair from his face, which he has come to decide has grown far too long, even in the few months since leaving England. He can feel the uncomfortable ridge on his skull where tree-burst penetrated his helmet – determined by Inias and Ted du Mort not to be life-threatening, since he insisted he didn't want to talk to Dean about it – and he itches at it now. He feels painted in a thin coat of sweat, and although he can see other men in the company peeling out of their combat jackets, he doesn't feel he can strip down to his shirt.

Castiel kicks some leaves aside to clear a space for himself to sit, and he eases himself down. He's been standing for about ten hours straight, and he doesn't even remember the last time he ate. He unclips the strap of his helmet, shifts his webbing around himself so it is more comfortably supported by his suspenders, and he digs into one of its pouches for a ration pack. He doesn't bother to check the label to see what the contents are; he rips it open.

In the distance, there is a dull thud, and Castiel's head snaps up.

Everyone in sight stands frozen, their fingers loose and distracted on whatever they were doing before the noise, and as a low rattle of gunfire starts up from the enemy line, Castiel knows he isn't mistaken. The ration pack falls forgotten into the dirt.

“Take cover!” he yells as he scrambles up onto his feet, and the shell smashes through a tree, sending metal and wood splinters in all directions. Castiel fumbles with his helmet as it slips over his head, and he runs along Baker's front-line. “Get in your foxholes, everyone in your foxholes!”

As he runs, he slips, his foot sliding out from underneath him, and he can only swear loudly at and at length as he drops down into an occupied foxhole. He slides and he manages his hurt his ass on a tree-root on the way down, and then he not only hits himself in the back of the head with his own rifle muzzle, but also ends up collapsed untidily on top of someone.

“Christ – sorry,” Castiel mutters, and he reaches out a hand to steady himself and get off, but then Dean tilts the front of his helmet up.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Dean says, and he grins as wide and as sunny as a warm afternoon, and something warm pools in Castiel's belly at the site of that lopsided smile. For a moment he can only lie there, half on top of Dean with one leg awkwardly thrown over Dean's thigh, with one hand in the dirt and the other on Dean's shoulder, and he looks at Dean.

On that hot day, there is a slow trickle of sweat down the side of Dean's nose, wet and shiny over his dusting of freckles, and in the stale, yellow, and dust-filled light, his eyes are greener than ever. His mouth is slightly chapped, and Castiel cannot think of anything except that he wants to kiss him. Overhead, a shell goes off, and the tops of their helmets are pelted with clumps of dirt and loose leaves.

Dean's eyes flicker down to Castiel's mouth, and at the very moment when Castiel's urge is strongest, he somehow finds the resolution to drag himself off Dean and scramble up out of the foxhole. He nearly slips again as he comes out, except that Dean grabs his boot and gives him a leg-up, and then Castiel is nearly off along the line before Dean has time to yell, “Sir – your rifle!”

Castiel looks back. Dean holds his M1 out, and Castiel snatches it without allowing himself to look at Dean's face, and then he keeps going. He shakes himself off – he doesn't need to be thinking about Dean right now – and he continues down the line.

It's not a proper attack, he knows that – if it was, they would unload all their fire-power onto the American hedgerow, as they have done a few times before – but Castiel still feels the cold fingers of panic on him as he runs. It doesn't need to be a proper attack to get his men killed.

“Stay in your foxholes,” he calls out as he goes along to check the perimeter.

They just need to hold until the enemy either reloads or decides that it's not worth their time, and then they might be able to get something done. He finds Lieutenant Virgil on the western end of the line, rifle pulled up into his shoulder and firing into the smoke and trees. Castiel drops into a crouch beside him.

“Get a couple men together – when they stop firing on us, take them around to where their line is thin up here,” Castiel is saying, and he points across the field opposite. “See? Take a couple mortar-men with you, blast a hole in the hedge, and let's see if we can get some men through there to flank their position before they figure out what we're doing. You wait until you see a decoy team on a suicide sprint the other side of the line – clear?”

Virgil nods curtly, and he twists back towards the rest of his platoon. “Milligan – get up here!”

Castiel uses a hand on Virgil's shoulder to push off and head back down the other way. He keeps his head ducked low, and he goes in search of Inias. He weaves past Sergeant Lafitte, who orders out arcs of fire for his squad; Bradbury, feeding bullets into Corporal Harvelle's machine-gun; one of the newer replacements firing into the foray with shaky hands on his carbine. He runs past, and then there is Private Gideon on his back in the dirt.

He's been hit by a piece of shrapnel, and even as Castiel watches, he judders, pale and sweating, as he goes into shock. Leaning over him is Dean, with gentle fingers on his face as he checks his pupils, and then Dean sits up, unzips his jacket, and wrestles it off to wrap it around Gideon and keep him warm. As he does so, there is the flash of his stomach as his shirt rides up, the crest of his hipbone, and Castiel has to shake himself. Jesus – his priorities are all over the place. He needs to get control of himself.

Castiel keeps going, and he finds Inias crouched by his second squad. As he reaches Inias, he grabs Castiel by the arm and yanks him in. “Took your goddamn time getting over here – what the hell is going on?”

Castiel brushes his hand away, and points out past the line to indicate their next move. “Virgil's going to take a team to try and break through the hedgerow down at the other end - I want Sergeant Garrigan, Ellsworth, and Richardson, plus two others, on a suicide sprint down this end of the line as a decoy. They've got to be fast, but they need to look like they mean business.”

“Oh, is that all?” Inias says, and the smile he offers Castiel looks a lot more like a grimace, but at least he's smiling.

Inias picks his men and they head out immediately, sprinting fast with their heads down, and Castiel's heart is racing as he watches them. Without meaning to, his hand goes to his crucifix, and he holds it tight enough to dig into his palm.

They make it to the other side, but not before Richardson is thrown backwards with a bullet through the rim of his helmet, and Castiel almost can't breathe. He knew that Brest wasn't going to be easy, but he didn't think that he'd be losing so many of his soldiers before he even got there.

Virgil's team get mortars on the hedgerow, but they don't have enough time to blow a hole clean through, and they definitely don't get the opportunity to push through and flank the German position. They retreat as fast as possible with gunfire on their heels, and Milligan takes a bullet through the shoulder but becomes very argumentative as soon as the medics arrive on-scene, insisting that he doesn't need to go back to the aid station.

The pressure from the German line eases up for a while, and Castiel thinks of the ration pack that he dropped. He isn't hungry anymore.

He goes along the line to make sure that everyone is alright, and as he walks, he catches sight of Dean wiping blood of his hands. He hasn't yet put his combat jacket on, and his T-shirt is damp with sweat, stuck to his stomach and the small of his back.

Castiel looks away, out across the field in front of him, and he tries to work out Baker's next plan of action to break through the German hedgerow – unsuccessfully. His mind is stuck on the close fit of Dean's shirt, the sliver of his back visible above his combat pants when he bends to retrieve his musette bag from the ground. Castiel swallows, scratches at the back of his neck. This is ridiculous.

He glances over at Dean, and finds Dean looking at him. His hair is greasy, sticking up at strange angles from where it's been trapped under his helmet, and he has a bruise on his jaw. Dean catches his eye, raises his eyebrows, and lifts a hand as though to wave hello.

Castiel drops his gaze and starts to rummage through the pockets of his combat jacket. He doesn't know what he's looking for – all he knows is that he needs to look as though he's being productive, and he is not to look at Dean. However, as he digs through pocket after pocket, his brain keeps coming back to the same thing: avoiding Dean makes it worse.

It's irrational. Castiel knows that the best way to get Dean out of his system is simply to stop spending time with him, and so that means staying away from Dean – but it's almost impossible when Dean is there every day, loud and obnoxious enough that he can't be ignored, and so absurdly handsome that Castiel can't stop thinking about him.

Avoiding him is making it worse.

Castiel swallows. He pulls his hands out of his pockets.

He can't believe he's doing this again.

With a deep breath to steel himself, Castiel heads over to Dean. He holds himself upright, stands tall, and he sets his jaw. He is in complete control of himself. He comes to stand in front of Dean and he clears his throat.

Dean looks up from his musette bag. “Hey, lieutenant.” He straightens up and pushes a hand backwards through his hair, as though to neaten

it, but in fact making it much worse. “Everything alright?”

“Winchester, I need you to meet me at eighteen-hundred hours, rear of the line – past three-platoon’s sentry-point,” Castiel tells him.

Dean’s brow furrows. “Sir?”

“We have a lot we need to discuss,” Castiel says, and he tilts his head forwards slightly towards Dean in encouragement, praying that he follows him. “In private, sergeant?”

“Oh – shit. Wait, when?”

Castiel tips his head back. “Jesus Christ, Winchester.”

“Sir, I can’t do eighteen-hundred, I’m sorry.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

Dean chews his bottom lip, glancing over his shoulder. “I’m on the battalion aid station rota then – I have to watch casualties and help out with any new men coming in.”

Castiel stares incredulously at him. “Delegate.”

“What?”

“You’re an NCO. Tell someone else to do it.”

“Sir, I can’t just—”

Castiel takes a step closer, up uncomfortably close into Dean's space, and he stares him down. Then, quietly, he says: “I’m only going to ask you for this once, Winchester, and this is it – so if you’re not there come eighteen-hundred hours, this is over.”

Dean balks. “You can’t be fucking serious.”

Castiel doesn’t answer that. He just looks at him.

Dean lets out a rough breath, and he twists at the waist to look around behind him. There are a handful of replacements standing around in small circle, talking in undertones and passing around a packet of cigarettes, but otherwise no-one in earshot. He knuckles at the side of his mouth. “Okay. Shit, fine. Okay.”

Castiel nods, and with that, he turns away. That wasn't so bad. He remained in control, and he is now certain that after eighteen-hundred hours, everything will be much easier, and then he'll finally be able to concentrate. He heads back down the line.

“What the hell was that about?”

Castiel looks over to find Inias picking through the contents of a small bag of dry rations. He hesitates. “What was what?”

Inias lifts his eyes from his food, and glances pointedly over at Dean.

“Nothing,” Castiel says. He reaches behind himself for the back pouch of his webbing and fumbles with the strap to get his canteen out.

Inias taps at Castiel's elbow to get him to turn around, and then easily pulls Castiel's canteen out of his webbing. He shakes it, one ear to the metal. “Is this the same water you've had all week?”

Castiel snatches it out of his hand. “No.” He untwists the cap and drinks some.

“It is, isn't it?” Inias shakes his head. “That's disgusting – not to mention, really fucking shitty, Cas. Dehydration is--”

“--the number one killer in the field,” Castiel recites. “I know.”

“God only knows how you're still alive.”

Castiel drinks a little more before handing it back to Inias and turning around for him to return the canteen to his webbing. “Well, when I die, I'll ask him.”

“You do that.”

Castiel moves away from Inias and goes through his pockets in search of his notebook and something to write with. He finds a stub of pencil shorter than his index finger, with so much grime on the tip that it will probably leave more dirt than lead on the paper, but it'll do. He

doesn't have the energy for a full report, but he writes the names down. *Laurie Gideon – shrapnel to chest + leg. KIA. Adam Milligan – bullet wound to shoulder. Aid station. Amos Richardson – head-shot. KIA.* All in the space of an hour.

He flips the page back to the days before, and he doesn't count – counting, or any form of keeping track of losses beyond handing these pieces of paper into battalion staff, is a waste of time – but he stares at the names until they blur into one endless grey line. His hand is cramped around the pencil, and he stretches it. His fingers are trembling. He clenches his hand back into a fist and breathes slowly.

At around fifteen-hundred hours, Castiel to leave Baker in Virgil's hands for a few hours as he is called back to battalion to discuss regimental movements through Le Conquet Peninsula towards Brest. Apparently the 175th are close to taking Hill 103, and the 115th are moving east towards Brest via Fort Montbarey.

The 116th are to clear through La Trinité as soon as possible to help the 115th with the coastal fortress, and neither Castiel nor the other company commanders of the 116th are quite sure how to explain to their superiors that La Trinité isn't exactly yielding easily. Castiel decides to keep quiet about the fact that Baker haven't even got close enough to see the battery yet, let alone to try and take it by force.

He walks back from battalion with Gabriel and Lieutenant Naomi – who is still standoffish and almost incomprehensibly boring, but not altogether too bad – and together they do their best to discuss anything except the upcoming assaults, about which Castiel feels Gabriel is firmly in denial. The conversation has turned from the sublime to the absolutely outrageous by the time they reach Baker Company, and so Castiel is almost glad to return to his own men.

He shakes out his sleeve to get his watch as he comes back towards the front-line – seventeen-twenty-six. There is a strange twist in his gut as he realises that there's just over half an hour before he is due to

meet Dean. He hadn't thought it was so close, and now that it's creeping up on him, he isn't sure he's made the right decision. He supposes it isn't too late to change his mind, but he can't bring himself to abandon the plan entirely.

Castiel decides to simply kill the time before eighteen-hundred hours comes about. He finally eats some of his rations, trying not to think about how long it's been since he last ate, and he checks over his maps, and he adjusts the sling of his rifle. He doesn't look at his watch again until he's completely certain that Dean must be late.

He takes a deep breath and checks his watch.

Dean is late.

Castiel isn't worried, of course. He's slightly tired, which is why he can't stop jogging his leg, and his fingers are in a state of non-stop movement. He puts a hand on his helmet, straightens it on top of his head, and he glances back towards the company. Maybe Dean will come through the trees just as Castiel looks over. Maybe he'll come running. Apologetic. Castiel lets out a long, slow breath.

There is a low hum of insects in the undergrowth and the noise begins to creep underneath Castiel's skin. He slaps at his neck, tries to be free of it and the bugs that he feels must be crawling all over him. He shakes himself, brushes down his clothes. He checks his watch.

Eighteen-twelve. Not that late, technically. Castiel did demand punctuality of him, but it isn't Dean's fault if something else came up. Perhaps someone was injured. Perhaps a senior officer gave him an order that couldn't be denied – senior to Castiel, even. A major, or one of the battalion staff. Dean could be hurrying this way right now.

Castiel looks back over his shoulder.

No sign of him. Castiel watches the second hand of his watch make its slow rotation, and then he watches the minute hand. Dean is late.

After another nine minutes, Castiel comes to the conclusion that he should give up. On this meeting, on Dean, on all of it - this is getting ridiculous. Castiel can't be seen standing out here for half an hour without someone becoming immensely suspicious, and he's already jittery with nerves and tension. He honestly doesn't need this extra stress, and he hates that Dean is doing this to him – whether intentionally or not. He checks his watch one last time, and before he heads back to his own foxhole, he decides to glance back over his shoulder again, and then there is Dean. Tipping his helmet over to one side as he walks to scratch at the back of his neck.

All the air rushes out of Castiel's chest in one burst. He doesn't know if Dean was testing him, or waiting to see what he would do, and Castiel is torn somewhere between irritation and relief to see him here. "You're late," he says, with a pointed look at his watch, and he folds his arms across his chest like a barrier.

"What, you getting worried I wasn't gonna show?" Dean teases, and there is a small, angry part of Castiel that wants to punch him for it. He wants to mark him red with the cut of his knuckles and say that this is over anyway. How dare Dean make light of this as though Castiel doesn't have everything weighed in the balance, here.

Castiel takes a deep breath and he doesn't bother answering. He narrows his eyes at Dean and he sets off walking through the trees. Dean comes jogging after him, one hand over his helmet to hold it steady.

"Uhh. Where are we going?" he asks as he falls into step with Castiel.

“Away from Baker.”

Dean makes a disparaging noise. “No shit, sir. Where?”

Castiel drops to one knee as they come up to the tree-line, and he pulls his rifle up towards his shoulder as he looks out. Dean holds still behind him, and they crouch together in silence for a few seconds, scanning the terrain, and then they set off again.

“Intel reports that there's no enemy movement to the north-west, and Baker should be in reserve for Fox and Dog for the next few hours,” Castiel reels off. He has all the details memorised. “Sergeant Masters is running a troop inspection followed by weapons cleaning in preparation for our next advance, and there's no patrol scheduled out this way until eighteen-forty-five, so we have just under half an hour.”

Dean raises his eyebrows. “Organised.”

Castiel doesn't dignify that with a response. How the hell does Dean expect him to do this, if not organised? They aren't like normal people – they can't just wander off anywhere to spend some time together. They might be needed back at the company ASAP, or they might be engaged by an enemy patrol, or worse still, they could be discovered by one of their own patrols.

It's a six-minute walk, and then it takes Castiel a few moments to find the abandoned foxhole he stumbled upon last night during a reconnaissance walk. He suspects it's German made – to Castiel's knowledge, none of the Allied forces have extended this far yet, and there are cigarettes stubs at the bottom of a brand that he doesn't recognise. He and Dean stand at the mouth of it.

Dean nudges aside a low cover of brambles with his foot. “Please tell me that's a foxhole and not a grave.”

Castiel gives him a withering look. “Don't tempt me. Get in.”

Not without grumbling to himself, Dean does as he's told.

Castiel climbs down after him, getting caught on brambles as he does. He removes his helmet and sets it on the far side of the foxhole by his rifle, and then, as he crouches in the dirt, less than a foot from Dean, there is that awkward moment when he and Dean look at each other expectantly. Castiel can feel a hot flush up his neck; he wonders if he'll ever get used to being overt about wanting Dean. He clears his throat.

“I'm gonna go out on a limb here,” Dean says, with a grimace, “and say that having everything so planned out kills the romance a little.”

Romance. It twists in Castiel's gut until he almost feels sick, and the way Dean's expression shifts, Castiel can tell that all his fear and apprehension is clear on his face – and one thing that Castiel knows for certain is that he does not want to talk about his feelings.

As expected, Dean opens his mouth to say something, brow furrowed with concern, and Castiel doesn't give him the chance. He brings up his hands and shoves Dean back against the dirt wall, into a sitting position, and then Castiel climbs into his lap.

Dean is startled, his eyes widening, and for a second Castiel accidentally meets his eyes – which is just uncomfortable for everyone involved, and Castiel doesn't want to think at all about the way Dean looks at him – so Castiel breaks eye contact. He shuts his eyes tight and surges forwards to kiss Dean hard.

Finally, Dean gets the idea. He opens up, licks into Castiel's mouth, bites, and his hands get to fumbling at Castiel's jacket, yanking the zip down. He wrestles the jacket back, tries to get it off. Castiel, with his hands either side of Dean's neck,is unwilling to let go of Dean long enough to get his arms free, so the fabric gets caught at his elbows and pools around the small of his back. He doesn't care; he's busy.

It's been too long since Castiel tasted Dean – too much time wasted being prideful and pretending that he could do without this – and he aches for it. He holds Dean's jaw tight, kisses him open-mouthed and filthy, presses his hips forwards against Dean even as they lean back from each other to get their clothes off.

Dean is doing his best to wrestle out of his jacket, and as he does so he inadvertently pitches his hips up. Castiel can feel the length of Dean's cock through his combat pants as it nudges up against Castiel's thigh, and for once Castiel doesn't think about it. He just presses his weight down against Dean, grinds forwards, and Dean makes this noise into Castiel's mouth that sparks fire up from the base of his spine. It's a low, hungry noise in the back of his throat, and Castiel wants it, so he does it again. Dean lets out a long exhalation through his nose, and his head drops back to rest against the wall of the foxhole as his hips rock towards Castiel in jerky, incremental movements. As his head falls back, breaking the kiss, Dean meets Castiel's eyes.

No – absolutely not. They're not doing this. They don't so much as glance at each other while they do this, and they certainly don't make prolonged eye contact, for Christ's sake. Castiel places his hands on Dean's shoulders to steady himself as he sits up, and he crushes his mouth back into Dean's as he rolls forwards against him.

Dean's hands are hot as they skate down over Castiel's chest, over his sides and his stomach; his hands slip under one of Castiel's suspenders to brush it over his shoulder, and then take advantage of the slack of his shirt to push up underneath to find bare skin. All the air punches out Castiel's lungs at Dean's cold hand, the blunt scrape of Dean's

fingernails over his bare hipbone, and he's breathing ragged now.

He can feel the insistent press of Dean's cock against his thigh, and he doesn't know what to do – he wants to suck it down and feel Dean lose control again; he wants to sink down onto it, wants Dean to split him open and fuck him so hard he can't think straight – and his head is spinning and he doesn't know what he wants. Then Dean's hands are moving and he has both tight on Castiel's ass, hauling him forwards with every long, slow roll from chest to pelvis, and the their cocks drag together at every thrust with a pressure that is electric, the way the heat is building underneath his skin – all Castiel knows is that he doesn't want to stop.

Dean is breathless underneath him, mouth open wide and gasping, and Castiel isn't far behind. He has one hand curled into the front of Dean's T-shirt, the other on Dean's waist to steady him as he grinds down into him, and Dean shifts one hand from Castiel's ass to a bruising grip on his hipbone, thumb along the ridge of it. They are holding each steady as they fuck forwards into one another, and Dean was looking at Castiel's abdomen where his shirt has rucked up around his ribs, but then his eyes flicker up to Castiel's face.

The slow rolling motion of their hips has them dragging their cocks together with a pressure that is electric, and having Dean look at him at the same time is almost too much. A shiver traces its fingers up Castiel's spine and his breath catches, face-to-face with that quiet, heated intensity, but that's not all. There's something else in the way Dean looks at Castiel, something that changes this from a desperate, indiscriminate fuck into something else entirely.

Castiel breaks the gaze. He isn't looking at Dean while they do this, and he needs to at least pretend that this – his racing pulse, the way he's struggling to breathe normally, the sudden fierce flare of want all through his body – isn't the result of looking Dean in the eyes.

He fumbles with the button of his pants, unzips, and is struggling to

get his pants open from this angle when Dean shoves one hand unceremoniously in, past underwear and all, and drags his palm up over Castiel's cock. Castiel just about manages to clamp down on his lower lip and keep himself under control, and then everything becomes more difficult as Dean wraps a hand around Castiel, almost tight enough to hurt, and jerks him just once, slowly.

Castiel only catches himself in time to cut off the tail-end of the breathless whine he makes at that, and he inhales sharply instead of letting the sound out. He tips his hips forwards to give Dean better access, to reach deeper into his pants, and then he finds himself just rutting against Dean's hand.

Dean is close, Castiel can tell - gasping into the air, his free hand on Castiel's ass so tight that his fingernails dig in, and he makes this low noise that buzzes up through Castiel's spine as he rocks forwards against Castiel's hip. His mouth is slightly open, bitten pink, his cheeks flushed, and Castiel can't stop looking at him. The way he tips his head back to lean on the foxhole wall, his throat is a long column, camouflage-cream smeared, with streaks of dried blood along one side, and Castiel is watching the flutter of muscles as he swallows.

Castiel doesn't know what comes over him. He dips his head and he kisses Dean's throat, just over his pulse point. Dean makes a startled noise above him that turns into a groan, and Castiel can't stop himself. He drags his lips over the skin of Dean's throat, with the barest scrape of teeth, up towards the hinge of his jaw – and Christ, the way Dean is responding, breath stuttering out past his lips with these fragmented sounds, these whines and low groans that rumble deep in his chest. He thrusts up against Castiel, and Castiel feels every muscle in his body tightening with the anticipation.

He pants against the hinge of Dean's jaw, grinding forwards into his hand with a pace that has his head spinning, and all he can think is that he wants more. He wants to map Dean's entire body like this, with his mouth and his tongue and his teeth; it's not enough, shoving his hands up underneath Dean's T-shirt and feeling his back arch as Castiel accidentally scratches down his sides. He wants to know

everything about him. He wants to know if he's ticklish. He wants to know how he likes to be touched. He wants to know how Dean would look with Castiel underneath him.

The heat and tension is stoked up too high, and just like that, Castiel is painfully close, his every muscle feeling stretched to aching as he tenses. He only has time to lean back, reach for his cock, and wrap his fingers around it before he's coming hard – with his eyes shut tight, and his teeth in his lower lip to keep himself from making any kind of embarrassing noise. Slowly, he opens his eyes as he rides out the last waves against Dean's body, and he meets Dean's eyes.

Dean pulls his hand out of Castiel's combat pants, a splatter of come on the inside of his wrist, and he returns it to Castiel's waist with a grip tight enough to leave bruises the shape of his fingertips. He uses his hold on Castiel to haul him forwards, pressed close enough that Dean can keep up the friction against Castiel's inner leg, rocking his hips hard and fast.

The warm afterglow of Castiel's orgasm renders him soft and compliant, his brain fuzzy as he comes back to reality, and so he isn't thinking as Dean grinds up into him. He isn't thinking about the fact that he's watching Dean bring himself to the edge – something he has never done before.

Any time they have done this together, Dean has been out of sight, either with his face tucked into Castiel's shoulder, or standing above Castiel as he knelt, and so dimly Castiel realises that he has never seen this before. Dean's open mouth, his furrowed brow, the sheen of sweat at his hairline – all of it is new to Castiel. He has never before seen the way Dean tucks his tongue into the corner of his lips as he concentrates, the way his chest heaves when he gasps. Dean's eyes are fixed on Castiel's mouth – and then he tilts his head forwards, lips parted.

Castiel realises what Dean is going to do only when he's a split-second

from kissing him, and he panics. He twists his head away, and so when Dean comes, groaning, he comes with his mouth wet and open against Castiel's jaw as Castiel looks away, out of the foxhole.

After a moment, Dean slumps back, letting his breath out in a long burst, and it is still several more seconds before Castiel can bring himself to look at Dean. Castiel's pulse is thundering inside his skull, and he feels something like fight-or-flight in his gut. He feels as though he's under attack.

With a deep breath, Castiel glances up at Dean through his eyelashes, but thankfully Dean is not paying attention; his eyes are closed as he comes down, breathing heavily. Castiel drops his eyes to his legs, still bracketing Dean's hips, and to the unfortunate come stain across one of his thighs. With a grimace, he wipes two fingers through it, scoops up as much of the mess as he can, and flicks it wetly to the floor of the foxhole. He then climbs off Dean – whose eyes open and follow him – and he starts scrubbing a handful of soil into the stain to make it less obvious.

Dean gives a short laugh. “Good luck with that. You need hot water.”

Castiel doesn't know whether Dean thinks he's completely inexperienced – which, admittedly, he is, although he is familiar enough with stain removal from his own private sexual endeavours – or just an idiot, but he doesn't bother to answer.

After a moment of silence, Dean seems to realise that Castiel means business by way of tidying up, so he hauls himself to his feet with a grunt. He adjusts his pants, wincing slightly as he does so, and then drops down to sit at the edge of the foxhole. As Castiel picks at the fabric of his pants, he can see out of the corner of his eye that Dean is watching him. He wants to say something, Castiel realises. Castiel wishes he wouldn't.

“So, uh.” Dean clears his throat. He pulls at the brambles nearby, twisting off a small shoot and bending it in his hands. “Does this mean you've stopped ignoring me?”

Castiel straightens up. “I wasn't ignoring you.”

“Right.” Dean rolls his head over to one side. “Of course. You just – coincidentally managed to get out of ever saying more than three words to me at a time since we--”

“I wasn't,” Castiel interrupts, voice raised over Dean's usual intolerable sarcasm. He hesitates. “More like... avoiding.”

Dean raises his eyebrows. “You know, 'avoiding' is just 'ignoring' with a little more glitz on it to make you feel better,” he says. “Honestly, sir, I don't give a rat's ass if you were ignoring me. I mean, it's a dick move and you're an asshole--”

Castiel's eyes narrow.

“--but,” Dean goes on emphatically, “I seriously don't care. I just wanna know if it's over.”

“If what's over?” Castiel acts as though the bottom of his stomach hasn't dropped out. He swallows. “This?”

“The ignoring.”

“Oh.” Castiel lets out a long, slow breath, and he finds he can't meet

Dean's eyes. He doesn't know what to say. He'll admit, it didn't make his life any easier just pretending that Dean didn't exist, but this never-ending spiral of fumbled conversations, fleeting looks, and desperate, awkward excursions into the woods isn't exactly easy either. He doesn't know which is worse – wanting Dean or trying to act as though he doesn't.

“Christ, you don't even know.” Dean rubs a hand down over his face, and out of nowhere there is real irritation in the way he looks at Castiel. “Fine, whatever. You know what? Do what you want. Hell, maybe you could actually figure out what you want first.” He holds his arms out at his sides. “I'll be here. If you're in, I'm in. And if you're not, then do me a favour, Novak, and leave me the hell alone.”

Dean has never called him Novak before. He's pulling away, Castiel can tell, and he realises then that his defensive act of pretending not to care for Dean as much as he does may have been too effective.

Castiel doesn't know how to say that he has to try and keep Dean at arms' length because otherwise he doesn't know how to survive. Castiel has spent a lifetime practising the art of being closeted, and he is very good at it – when all he has to do is go through life, quiet and hidden, pretending to look at girls. He has never tried this with another person involved, and he has no idea how to balance this. He has to either be fully committed to the illusion of being a normal person, or he can't do it at all, and Dean terrifies him. Even Dean saying *if you're in, I'm in* is swinging too close to something real and tangible that Castiel knows he can't have, and it has anxiety spiking in his guts until he feels he could shake apart. He clenches and unclenches his hands, over and over, and Dean just looks at him.

Castiel doesn't know what to do if he loses Dean, and so he says the first thing that comes into his head.

“When we stopped outside Morlaix on the march here,” he says, and then stops. “When we were in that alley – and that house--” His throat

closes up. He's cotton-mouthed and he can't get the words out. “When you followed me.”

Dean looks as though he wants to say something, maybe to prompt Castiel further, but he doesn't speak. He waits.

“That was the first – I mean.” Castiel exhales slowly, and he comes over to stand by Dean, and then to sit by him, legs dangling down into their foxhole. “I hadn't – I'd never done that before.”

Dean frowns. For a second he's silent, looking at Castiel with a look of absolute bewilderment. “Done what before?” he says, and then with a laugh, as though the idea is ludicrous, he suggests teasingly, “What, getting your dick sucked?”

Castiel swallows. “Anything.”

For a moment, Dean just stares at him. Then he laughs again, louder. “Bullshit, you can’t be serious. No way. No fucking way, sir, you gotta be—” His laughter slowly dies out as he looks back at Castiel and sees his expression: solemn, slightly awkward, with the hot flush of embarrassment starting up unwillingly beneath his jaw. Dean’s mouth falls open. “No way. Holy shit – you’re—?”

“It’s not a big deal,” Castiel interrupts, his embarrassment mounting with every second that Dean recoils in shock.

“It kind of is, though – I mean, seriously? You’ve gotta be kidding me.” Dean runs a hand backwards through his hair, shakes his head in disbelief. “You’re a good-looking guy, there must have been someone back in the U.S at least…”

Castiel huffs, exasperated. He's unsure why this concept is so difficult for Dean to grasp. He's never been with anyone, he's never had this before – it doesn't have to mean anything, but it's the facts. He looks away, back in the direction of the rest of the company. He has no idea why he's having this conversation. He should never have said anything. He should just go straight back to the others before they start to wonder why the hell Castiel and Dean keep going missing together. He says, with slight irritation, "I don't exactly get a lot of opportunities."

"What do you mean? It's easy, you—" Dean cuts himself off, and he stares at Castiel, wide-eyed, without speaking.

"What?" Castiel demands, his self-consciousness making him bad-tempered.

"Oh my god," Dean says. "You're actually – you're—"

Castiel rolls his eyes. "A virgin, yes."

"—queer."

Castiel stops. He looks over at Dean, and he doesn't know what to say to that.

The lack of denial, however, is clearly enough confirmation for Dean, and he reels back a little, hand over his mouth, and says, "Jesus."

Humiliation comes creeping over Castiel the longer he just sits there watching Dean react in shock and confusion, making his skin prickle with shame. He bristles instead, his jaw set tight with annoyance, and

says sharply, “You missed that fact? You’re slow, Winchester, but you’re not an idiot – I had your dick in my mouth.”

Dean scoffs. “Yeah, but I’ve been doing stuff too, and I’m not—”

Castiel raises his eyebrows.

Dean sees the disbelief on Castiel’s face, and he lets out a small noise of protest. “I’m not, I swear! Honest. I just… I don’t know, man, I like girls too. I like them both.” He gives a half-shrug, face twisting nervously, and he looks down at his feet. “I don’t know what that makes me.”

“Indecisive,” Castiel supplies.

Dean lets out a loud laugh. “Okay, fuck you, sir.”

Against his better judgement, Castiel feels a small smile softening his mouth. “I’m only joking,” he says, and then, without thinking about it: “You’re lucky.”

Dean scoffs, and he comes closer, taking slow, sauntering steps until he is stood beside Castiel. “Don’t be like that. Come on, it’s easy – a lot of women like a man in uniform, and you’d be all quiet and mysterious, they’d love you.” He nudges Castiel playfully with his shoulder. “You could do it, too.”

“I—” Castiel hesitates. The first phrase that comes to mind is, *I don’t know how,* but that’s not the truth. “I don’t want to,” he says quietly.

He doesn't know how to explain. He wants men, and not just in the way that he craves their broad shoulders and their long hands and their hard jaw-lines, with heat in the pit of his stomach. He wants it in the cold, early hours of the morning before the rest of the world is awake, and he wants it in the form of distracted touches in the long afternoons together, and he wants dinner with cotton tablecloths and a roast like his mother used to make – and a man on the other side of the table.

Before Castiel can fully understand what is happening, Dean has leaned forwards into Castiel's space and gently kissed him. It's sudden and unexpected, and so soft that Castiel feels himself aching to melt into Dean for the comforting touch of his hands, and it sparks fear all through Castiel's blood. He jerks away so hard that Dean nearly topples over.

"What the hell are you doing?" Castiel bursts out. As though from a distance, he can hear himself, and he knows that he sounds insane, but he can't stop.

Dean blinks, bewildered. "I just—"

Castiel gets to his feet, climbing out of the foxhole, and takes a step back, away from Dean. "Don't you ever do that again."

"What?" Dean stands, and although he doesn't move to follow Castiel as he backs away, Dean stares him down. "What are you talking about? All I did was—"

"Winchester, I'm not interested in whatever you think is—"

"You're acting like I've never—"

“We don’t do that,” Castiel snaps, and he pulls away into himself, his arms folded tight across his chest. Against his wishes, he can feel his breath coming quick with panic, because Dean Winchester kissed him – without lust, or the angry need to prove a point, but just simply because he felt Castiel needed comfort, because he wanted to be that comfort – and worse still, Castiel wants him to do it again. He balls his hands into fists against his sides. “Never. We’re not – Jesus, Winchester, we’re not… going steady, here. Fuck. We're not getting married.”

Dean balks, his expression incredulous, but all he says is, “Okay.”

“We’re not,” Castiel says, and then, “We don’t,” because he doesn’t know how to say the things he needs to say, and he’s frightened and desperate. The next word he says is an accident: “Please.”

“Yeah, okay.” Dean shifts his weight from foot to foot, and he nods. He puts his hands into the pockets of his combat pants. “Sure.”

Castiel doesn’t look at him. His hands fidget at his sides. There is a hot rush underneath his skin, something that straddles the line between gratitude and shame, and he wants to find the right words to say all that once that he’s not a fairy and that he’s glad he has the reassuring solidity of Dean beside him. He doesn’t find the words.

Without speaking, Dean moves slightly, settling his weight on his left leg, and it tilts his shoulder sideways until it makes contact, arm-to-arm with Castiel. To any outside view, it is probably unintelligible that they are touching at all, but to Castiel, it is crystal clear: they are leaning on each other.

1st September, 1944

On Castiel's order, four-platoon lets off smoke that spirals up hot and red, and Baker disperse fast, platoon leaders and NCOs shouting for their men. There is a strange lull in which there is silence as the soldiers run for their positions – a moment in which perhaps the Germans have not yet got to their weapons – and then it begins.

The 88s sound their hollow drum first, shells whistling through the air, but Castiel is used to that. He runs to follow one-platoon and then there is an explosion that throws sharp curls of metal close enough that Castiel throws up a hand up instinctively to defend himself. Someone is howling, but Castiel doesn't spare them more than a glance. He doesn't have time to think about that. “Proven route,” he yells at them as he keeps back from the blast radius. “Follow the proven route--”

Baker's own mortars slam the dirt, kicking up soil and metal and smoke, and they drown out the sound of the German's machine-guns starting up towards them. There are rounds bouncing off the ground in front of Castiel, and he knows he can't stay there. He sprints after one-platoon, and weaves after them – he can see the shape of their footprints in the dirt, their path twisting back and forth, and he sticks close to it. His eyes dart to the ground either side of him as he runs, and he knows he's paranoid, that he's imagining things, but his eyes are picking out a thousand tiny dark shapes that could be the tripwire of an S-mine. He clutches tight onto his helmet.

“Move up, move up,” he shouts, and he pulls his rifle up into his shoulder. He squeezes one eye closed, peers through the sights in the direction of the battery, but there is too much smoke and he can't see enough to fire effectively.

At the front of the squad, Private Pond runs for the enemy position, and the S-mine seems to go off in slow-motion. There is a dull click, and the mine is fired up into the air – Castiel watches the sharp metal tear up through Pond's calf – and Castiel only has time to flinch back, to drop into a crouch, and his mouth is open to yell, *take cover* , but it

explodes before he has a chance. At waist-height, the mine shatters into metal slivers, and the air is full of their hissing as they fly to shred through everything it comes into contact. Something pings off the side of Castiel's rifle. He curls tightly into himself and he waits, and when it seems that the shrapnel has settled and the air is full of Pond's screaming, he uncovers his head.

“Medic!” he yells, and he twists back to the direction where the company had originally come from. In the distance, he can see Dog Company running to flank the battery, and the 88s spit fire at them, blowing shallow craters and smoke columns in the front of their advance. Castiel drags in a deep breath and gets to his feet. He twists to face the rest of the squad. “Keep moving up – keep going – get into the trench!”

Machine-gunfire ripples through a replacement whose name Castiel can't remember, and as he falls the 88 pounds back against the earth again, and its whistle builds into a scream as it strikes hard. It falls on the far western side of the battery perimeter, by the tree-line, which is entirely too far to effectively hit any of the squads assaulting the trenches. Castiel follows the trajectory with his eyes, and he finds four-platoon setting up the charge for their mortars.

“Shit,” he whispers.

Castiel glances back over his shoulder as three-platoon, where they are still trying to move towards the German line without being peppered by S-mines or caught by enemy gunfire, and then he looks towards four-platoon, where his mortar-men are setting up their next charge and apparently oblivious. There is nothing he can do to get their attention from here without drawing the entire battery's attention to the fact that he's the commanding officer.

He takes a deep breath, and he pushes himself forwards, running hard for where four-platoon is stationed. As he runs, he sweeps his hand over in front of him, gesturing for Alistair's attention. “Pull back!” he

yells, and Alistair's head comes up to watch the instructions of his waving hand, and then the next shell punches a hole in the centre of four-platoon's line.

For a moment, Castiel falters. He slows, and he thinks he's going to stumble over his own feet, and bile rises in his throat, and then he keeps going. He can feel the crucifix bouncing against his collarbone.

He knew the battery at La Trinité was going to be difficult, with more than half of the 116 th 's infantry companies on the assault, but he didn't know it was going to be like this.

As he approaches, he sees someone sit up amidst the smoke and rubble. Lance Corporal McCullough. There is blood pouring down one side of his face. His eye and mouth are swollen until they're unrecognisable, and he coughs dark blood down over his chin. Beside him, Alistair is picking himself up with the slow, ginger movements of someone hit. Castiel skids to a halt at their line and drops into a crouch. “Move back now!” he shouts, and the enemy 88 thuds again. “ Now – go, go! Back towards that tree-line, find cover--”

That's all the time he has, because then the next shell hits and it jars his legs out underneath him and he hits the ground. His helmet rolls away, and he is momentarily blinded by the sharp pain of landing on his old shrapnel wound. He lies there in the dirt, and gasps, and then he climbs back upright. He grabs a handful of McCullough's clothing and pulls him upwards, slips one of McCullough's arms around his neck, slips a hand underneath his thigh, and hauls him over his shoulder.

“You're alright, you're alright,” Castiel is muttering as he runs, and the next shell nearly brings him to his knees, but he keeps his balance somehow and keeps going. He drops McCullough down behind the tree-line, propped up loosely against an old trunk, and he slaps a hand reassuringly to his shoulder before he runs back out. “Medic!”

There are more men still on four-platoon's line who didn't make it, but Castiel can't retrieve them all. All but one of the seriously injured mortar-men have been pulled back, and the unhurt are setting up their charges behind the cover of the trees.

“Let's go,” Alistair is shouting, seemingly unfazed by whatever injury he has, and even though Castiel doesn't like him, he can't help but be relieved that he's in command. “Right stick, left six, range six-hundred--”

Castiel runs out to get the last wounded mortar-man to safety, but before he can reach him, there is Dean, stumbling to a halt amongst the broken mortar-tripods and ducking down to rip open the tattered front of the man's jacket. He glances up only once as he gets to work, and he catches Castiel's eye. “I got this, sir, get outta here,” he calls over the noise, and Castiel doesn't need telling twice. He pulls his gaze from Dean's blood-dark hands and he runs.

2nd September, 1944

Castiel makes his way along the line, checking their perimeter and to see that it links up with the rest of the 116th. Most of all, though, he's checking that the men are doing alright. He knows that it's not technically his job, that he should leave it to First Sergeant Masters, but he can't help but worry.

They've had a tough day's fight, with the Germans showing no sign of relinquishing La Trinité anytime soon. They lost three men today – two of them replacements, not even old enough to buy themselves a goddamn beer – and now the night is dark and chill, with a faint drizzle that serves to cloud the air and to slowly but surely soak through their ODs.

He kneels at one foxhole, then another, all the way down the line. “How are you doing?”

Kevin Tran flashes him a brave grin. “Can't complain, sir,” he whispers back.

“I know.” Castiel tips his head over to one side. “But if you could?”

Tran laughs, and Corporal Sorento next to him, usually almost as reserved as Castiel is, even cracks a smile. “Well, it's a little damp, sir. If you could get the rain to lay off sometime soon, that'd be just great.”

Castiel's mouth tilts into a half-smile. “I'll see what I can do. Are you alright for ammunition, injuries, equipment?”

“Sir, you trying to run the First Sergeant out of a job?”

“Yes – regiment wants Masters for next Supreme Commander,” Castiel says, expression carefully solemn, and it takes Tran a second to figure out he's kidding.

“Shit, sir, you oughtta write a book,” Sorento mutters, raising his eyebrows.

Somewhere over their heads, there is a loud crack, and then as the tracer goes off, eye-searingly bright overhead, the world is illuminated in a ghostly, flickering red light. Castiel watches it. “Well, Sorento, if I ever get the time, you'll be the first to know.” He slaps a hand to his

shoulder, and nods towards the front of the line. “Keep sharp. They'll be starting up again soon.”

He feels the threat of the tracer in his gut.

Castiel continues along the line, walking tentatively as though fearful that if he steps too heavily, he will be heard and the enemy will start up their shelling again.

“Sir?” someone whispers from a nearby foxhole, and Castiel can see the silhouette of a figure sitting up. “Is that Lieutenant Hester?”

“Novak, actually,” Castiel says. He walks over and crouches at the rim of the foxhole. “Everything alright?”

The figure hesitates. “I – I thought I saw something out there.” Castiel recognises the voice now – and the hesitation – as Benji Rosen.

Next to him, Private Miller groans. “No, you didn't.”

“You don't know that!” Rosen snaps.

“Shit, Rosen, why you bothering the lieutenant about it? I can tell you, there ain't anything--”

“Where, private?” Castiel asks.

“Out that way,” Rosen says, and describes an unintelligible point

between two other points. Castiel does his best, but he can't see anything. He can see the same darkness as everybody else, and nothing more otherwise.

“I can't see anything,” Castiel says, and then, to stave off Miller's tired belligerence, he adds, “That doesn't mean that there isn't anything there, though. Thank you for letting me know.” Better to be safe than sorry, he thinks privately, and even though he's certain that Rosen had imagined seeing something, Castiel can't stop glancing up at the area he indicated. “Keep looking out. If you think you see something, don't stare right at it. Stare past it, off to the side. Your peripheral vision is better at picking up movement.”

“Thanks, sir.”

Castiel hauls himself up onto his feet and keeps going. Everything seems to be fine for now, and the tracer has gone down, so he feels slightly less worried. He thinks it's incredible how he has adjusted since coming to France – how it has reached a point where chaos to the point of near-nervous breakdown has becoming 'stressed', and anything short of that is normal.

He comes to a familiar foxhole, and he climbs down into it to sit beside Inias. “Good morning,” he says.

“Don't say that to me,” Inias replies. “I'm in denial. It's just past midnight and once this is all over, I still get at least five hours shut-eye. At least. Maybe the Krauts will even give us a lie-in. Who knows? I'm optimistic.”

Ahead of them, a slow rate of gunfire starts up – not enough to cause any damage or make a real impact, but enough to get their attention. Enough to keep them alert, where they could be sleeping. Beside Castiel, Inias groans.

“Christ, they've only been shelling us all fucking day,” he complains. “Are they not tired? I mean, I'm assuming they need to sleep as well, unless the Germans have got goddamn bats on their artillery. It's three in the morning. Do they not want a fucking break?”

“Apparently not,” Castiel says slowly. He's so tired his eyes hurt, and he props his chin up on his knee.

Inias turns his head to Castiel, and for once his face is serious. “Cas. We can't keep them stood-to all night, they'll never make it through tomorrow.”

Castiel takes a deep breath. “They only have to break through once.”

“What if they never go on the offensive?” Inias asks, and he props himself up on his elbow. “What if they just do this all night – wear us out, make us useless tomorrow? It could all just be one big bluff to shred morale – and shit, Cas, if it's not already working. I'm an officer, okay, I don't do jack shit, and I'm exhausted. Think about everyone else.”

Castiel repeats himself, slow and firm. “They only have to break through once.”

“Or not at all.”

He picks at the dead skin on his lower lip. Of course he's considered the possibility that this is just a stunt by the Germans to keep them up all night and lower morale for the next day when everyone in the company is exhausted. However, he can't just decide to stand everybody down on a hunch.

“Neither us, nor them, have made any progress in the past two days,” Castiel says, and he can hear that his voice is flat as he recites Captain Singer's words almost verbatim. “Either we're just going to keep chipping away at each other indefinitely, or one of us is going to have to make a move. We don't have the resources to do that. That means--”

“Yeah, yeah, I know what it means. Christ.”

Castiel lets out a long sigh. “The intel is good, Inias.”

“Great. So we've heard from intelligence, but no sign anywhere of a goddamn supply officer,” Inias complains. “You know that I've been eating nothing but glorified trail mix for two days?”

“Yes, I know. You won't stop talking about it, and if you recall, I did offer you some of my--”

Inias shoves at his shoulder. “Get out of here. We've talked about this - I'm not taking your food. End of story. You need it more than I do.”

“I don't see what the issue is. Most of the time I don't eat it.”

“Good point, that reminds me – eat your fucking breakfast!” Inias starts up in an argumentative whisper. “And lunch, ideally!”

“I don't have time.”

“Jesus, Cas.” Inias' voice is incredulous. “Make time! Please?”

Castiel sets his jaw. “Inias, I don't need you babysitting me.”

For a moment, Inias is silent. Then, almost so quietly that Castiel can't hear him, he mutters, “You let him babysit you.”

Castiel looks over. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“What? It doesn't mean anything. I'm just pointing out the obvious, here--”

“He's a fucking medic, Inias. That's what he gets paid to do.”

“Oh, he gets paid to follow you around like a puppy? Shit, forget being an officer, I should've applied for that.”

Castiel doesn't have to sit here and listen to this. He places the butt of his rifle firmly on the ground and uses it to push himself up onto his feet before replacing it on his shoulder. “It doesn't suit you,” he says, and he looks down into the foxhole. “Being an asshole.”

“I'm always an asshole,” Inias says, and Castiel doesn't say what he thinks: *not like this.* He adjusts his rifle sling over his shoulder and he continues down the line.

He doesn't know what the hell Inias' problem is. They're all tired, they're all in a bad mood, but whenever Inias snaps at Castiel, it always comes back to Dean. Sometimes Castiel hates that Inias knows

at all. He reminds himself that someone has to – he needs someone looking out for him, watching his back if things go wrong, but he wishes it wasn't his best friend. He doesn't need the judgemental way Inias looks at him sometimes when he and Dean come back from a walk – even if it is just a walk, to hear about Dean's medical reports, or about what's going on with his brother, or about the plan for the next few days. He doesn't need to be worrying about what Inias will think on top of everything else.

He goes around a few more foxholes, making sure the men are awake, reassuring them that they'll be stood down soon, and then, as he traipses through the trees and the dark, he comes to a foxhole that at first glance seems empty. He looks for the tell-tale bulk of a rifle or machine-gun propped up against the embankment, finds none, and is about to move on when a sarcastic voice says, “God, what's a girl got to do to get noticed around here?”

Castiel does a double-take. He looks back into the foxhole. “Winchester?”

“Hey, sweetheart.”

Castiel is tired enough that he's willing to pretend not to have heard Dean say that. Now that he squints, he can see the faint outline of somebody sitting in the bottom of the foxhole. He crouches at the edge. “I didn't see you.”

“What can I say? I'm mysterious.”

Castiel exhales slowly. “No, you're not.”

He twists his head back to look out over the line, but there is nothing of interest there. A soft wind stirs the leaves, whips up the drizzling

rain into a temporary frenzy that stings at Castiel's face and catches on his eyelashes. Things settle again; Castiel wipes at his face with a sleeve that is equally damp.

Out of the blue, Dean says, “God, I can't think straight with all this chit-chat.”

Castiel lets out a long breath, weary, and he looks over at Dean. “It's called noise discipline, Winchester.”

“Is my whispering really that big a deal when you're a giant target looming over there?” Dean says, and he waves a hand at where Castiel is still crouched over the foxhole.

Castiel narrows his eyes at him. He considers telling him to stop being a smart-ass, but instead he shifts, pushes his legs out in front of him one by one, and sits on the edge with his legs dangling down. He feels he should say something to Dean, but he can't think of anything, and for the moment, he's content just to sit here in silence.

A couple minutes pass in that quiet, and Castiel wonders idly if he's ever heard Dean shut up for this long before. He thinks that any day Dean doesn't want to talk is probably the day he knows something is seriously wrong. Castiel, always a fan of peace and quiet, is surprised to find that he misses Dean's rambling. He wants to talk to Dean about nothing.

It turns out Castiel doesn't have long to wait.

“So, uhh,” Dean says, and in the dark, Castiel can hear the clink of him playing with the strap of his helmet. “If you don’t mind me asking – when did you know?”

“Know what?” Castiel asks absently, and looks over at Dean, who just raises his eyebrows. “Oh. Right.” He shrugs his shoulders. “Lieutenant Wallace.”

Dean lets out a short huff of laughter. “I knew it,” he declares. “I knew you two must’ve had a thing—”

“Well, you're wrong, then, because we didn’t.”

“What?”

“I, ah.” Castiel shakes out his sleeve to wipe clean the muzzle of his rifle where it has become mud-caked. He is determined not to look at Dean – he doesn’t even like thinking about this, much less talking about it. “I tried to kiss him, when I was fifteen.”

“Shit.”

Castiel tilts his head away dismissively, scrunches his face up slightly. “No, it’s okay. He was good about it – said, *boys don’t do that*, and then he just said we could pretend it never happened. He even promised not to tell my mother, for which I am eternally grateful, so—”

Dean is silent for a moment. “So what – you just never talked about it, ever?”

“Not really. Now that we’re older, he jokes about it sometimes… and brings it up sometimes when I’m annoyed with him, just to irritate me even more. And he looks out for me, not that he needs to.” Castiel

squints through the dark at his rifle's muzzle. He scratches at it with a fingernail, feeling for any residual dirt, and then glances back up at Dean. Frankly, he's amazed that Dean hasn't laughed at him, but here Dean is – quiet, patiently listening as though he's really, genuinely interested. Castiel can't understand it, but by this point, he doesn't see the point in trying to. "What about you, then?"

"What about me?"

"What brought you to Sodom and Gomorrah?"

Dean brings up a hand to rub at the back of his neck. "Uh, technically, you did."

Castiel stares at him. "What?"

"You know." Dean tips his head over as though trying to crack his neck, but Castiel has a suspicion that he's just avoiding Castiel's eyes. "I'd never, uh – acted on anything before you showed up."

"I didn't 'show up,'" Castiel objects. "I was here all along. You're the one who got reassigned."

Dean scoffs. "Glad to see you've got your priorities all set in order, as usual."

Castiel ignores that. He doesn't need Dean to know that he has something buzzing under his skin at the idea that he was the one who turned Dean. Castiel doesn't know if it's pride or fear. It feels most like disgust, something slimy that he can't pick out underneath his fingernails. He was the one who broke Dean. He feels like he needs to

do something with his hands, so he pulls his rifle up into his shoulder, the barrel balanced on the foxhole rim, and he peers through the iron-sights. He doesn't know what he was expecting: it's still dark. He changes the topic. “So does that mean you've never--?”

“Oh, no way,” Dean says, and the instinctive way he laughs at that is only slightly hurtful. “No, there were a load of girls back in Lawrence. One was pretty desperate to marry me, but uh – she didn't do it for me, you know. Plus, there were a couple broads in Slapton too that were alright, but nothing special. And--” Dean hesitates. He sits quietly in the dirt for a second, his fingers twitching on the strap of his medical kit. “I, uh.” He clears his throat, and then he says the next part so quickly that Castiel almost doesn't catch it. “And I sucked a guy in Falmouth, so.”

It takes Castiel a moment to process. “What?”

“Some guy, I don't know,” Dean says dismissively, but he speaks with too haste to be anything but embarrassed. “From the Canadian 2nd Armoured. I told him I'd never say anything but I heard he died on Juno, so I guess the secret's out.”

Castiel stares at him.

Dean glances over, and looks away almost immediately. He rolls his shoulders up and back as though he's doing his best to shake something off. “It wasn't – Jesus. Don't look at me like that.”

“I'm not,” Castiel says, but honestly, he has no idea how he's looking at Dean right now.

“It was just... this one, stupid thing.”

“You don't have to explain yourself to me.” Castiel doesn't mean for his voice to come out like that – flat, emotionless – and he turns away to look out across the line. Another tracer goes off, bright and hissing through the sky, and Castiel jumps, slides down into the foxhole beside Dean where he can't be seen. He flips himself over onto his stomach, pulls his rifle up, and braces himself for the ensuing gun-fire, but seconds tick past and none comes.

There is a long silence, and then Dean says, “You weren't exactly available back then.”

Castiel turns, incredulous, and he looks at Dean, who stares off determinedly into the distance. Dean is illuminated now by the tracer, his skin cast in a strange, rippling light as though being seen through moving water. Under the red light of the tracer, he looks faintly pink.

As Castiel watches, Dean's mouth twists – a nervous tic – and Dean exhales through his nose. He looks down to fiddle with his musette bag, and then glances over with the beginnings of a frown. “What?” he says. “Aren't we supposed to be watching the line, here?”

Without thinking, Castiel's gaze drops to his mouth. He then turns out towards the front line. He is acutely aware now of their proximity, their forearms within centimetres of touching as they lie side-by-side to watch the line. He tries not to think too much about what Dean has said. He traces the field ahead of them with his eyes, allowing his peripheral vision to pick out any spots of movement, and he doesn't think about kissing Dean.

When the woods are dark and quiet, when every man is busy stood-to in case of another counter-attack, it probably wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the rest of Baker Company couldn't even be sure where Castiel was. They could be in the next foxhole over and not know that he was here with Dean. He could be anywhere. He

could be doing anything.

Castiel takes a deep breath and he stares out through the long shadows of the trees, the tangles of undergrowth that shift in the wind and trick his eyes into thinking that he can see figures running across his field of vision.

He can feel Dean glancing at him every couple of seconds, and he pretends he can't. Each glance is longer than the one before, until Dean is just watching him with same intensity with which he's meant to be watching the line, and Castiel can't ignore him anymore. He looks over.

“I thought we were supposed to be watching the line,” Castiel says, and his mouth is dry.

“We are,” Dean says. They're not.

They're lying there in the dirt looking at each other, and Castiel can't remember what they were ever talking about. There is the soft line of Dean's mouth, and there is the nervous crease of his brow, and there is the faint shift of muscles in his throat as he swallows. Castiel can see the edge of his collarbone beneath his shirt, the dim glint of the chain of his dog-tags around his neck.

Castiel can't think about that. Thankfully, the tracer begins to flicker and fade as it falls to earth, and the night is sweeping back over them again. Castiel is getting sick of only feeling comfortable in the dark – when the enemy can't see them; when he can't see Dean.

He props himself up onto his elbows and rolls his shoulders back to try and dispel some of his back-ache. He has been wearing his webbing – and most of the time, a heavy haversack full of extra

equipment – for so long that he is starting to feel like a pack mule. Then he finds that there are stones at the bottom of the foxhole that dig sharply into his elbows, and he is not in the mood for taking more discomfort on top of everything else that hurts; he tilts and he drops down heavily to lie on his side.

It's almost surreal, just how good it feels not to be alert – not walking, not standing around watching the progress of his company, not lying halfway up an embankment and watching for the enemy. He is just lying at the bottom of a hole, curled onto his side, and it feels incredible.

“Sir, I don't think now is the greatest time for a nap,” Dean says, although there is a lightness to his tone that suggests he's laughing at Castiel.

Castiel sighs. “Winchester, do you know how many hours I've slept in the two days?”

“How many?”

Castiel twists his head over to look at him. “I haven't.”

Dean whistles through his teeth. “Shit, sir, you deserve a nap.”

“Yes, I do.” Castiel closes his eyes. It's only now that he's down here, still and quiet for the first time in days, that he realises just how exhausted he is.

It's strange, the degree to which he gets used to being tired. He feels it heavy all through his bones, but he takes it as part of the weight of his

webbing. It makes his hands clumsy, his fingers shaky, but he takes it as the cold, as having to haul his M1 around everywhere he goes. He feels he could go to sleep and never wake up.

The next thing Castiel knows, there is a great deal of squirming and adjusting of clothes and equipment, and there is a warm, solid body entirely too close to him.

Castiel cracks an eye open to see Dean – having shimmied down from the foxhole embankment to lie down at the bottom of the foxhole next to him. “What are you doing?”

Dean wriggles in the dirt to get comfortable. He grins over at Castiel. “Thought maybe you needed some company.”

“I don't,” Castiel says bluntly. “I need you to watch the line.”

“Why? I don't have a weapon.”

“You have eyes.”

Dean scoffs. “Come on. What are the chances they're gonna come through this particular section of our perimeter?”

“And what if everyone thinks like that?” Castiel tells him. “What if every man, in every foxhole, is currently half-asleep, thinking, *it won't be me*?”

“Well, then, I'd say maybe the CO should get out there and make sure

the ones with rifles are actually awake."

Castiel closes his eyes again. "Winchester," he says. "Don't make me kick you."

Dean gives a low laugh, but Castiel can hear him as he rolls over and shifts into a position where he can look over the rim of the foxhole, and for a few minutes, Castiel just curls against the soil and pretends that there is nothing more to think about.

3rd September, 1944

The bullet tears clean through Gallagher's jaw, and his blood is a slow dark spray over Castiel's face, dripping down over his chin and nose. Gallagher is looking back at him, mouth hanging open. There are little white shards of broken teeth in his cheek. Castiel sees his throat work uselessly, sees a fresh pulse of blood wash up out of Gallagher's mouth, and then a hand on his shoulder jerks Castiel awake.

"Sir, Captain Laufeyson is looking for you."

Castiel blinks until the face of First Sergeant Masters comes into focus before him – not Gallagher. He rubs both hands down over his face and then climbs up from his sleeping bag. "Thank you. Where is he?" he mumbles.

"Over by three-platoon's sentry point, sir," Masters says. Not Gallagher.

Castiel nods by way of another thank you, and he hauls himself out of his foxhole to go stumbling through the cold air of a misty dawn in

search of three-platoon. The air is almost silver with the chill and fog, and he finds Gabriel cold and shivery past the sentry-point.

“Ain't it a beautiful morning,” Gabriel says tensely.

“Is everything alright?” Castiel asks.

Gabriel huffs. “You're really not into pillow-talk, are you? You know what, don't answer that. We're going for the battery again – I know, right? I was surprised too. But we're gonna mix it up a little. You, me, Michael, we're gonna flank around it and try and take it from the other side – arguably, the more difficult side, since that's the side that actually faces the sea like the goddamn bunker was designed for, but they've flipped everything around to keep us tricky bastards out, so maybe this'll work. Maybe.”

“Maybe,” Castiel echoes. “What's the intel?”

“According to guys back at battalion, they've got German communications down between La Trinité and Graf Spee, as well as having cut off their MSRs, so we shouldn't have to worry about those naval guns or about reinforcements.”

Castiel nods. “When are we moving out?”

“Fox is already gone. I'm going out east in about a half hour, and then you'll be going west – the long way round, lucky you – and we'll regroup at.... shit, hang on.” Gabriel digs around for a map to show Castiel, and Castiel looks at the route with the thought that today is going to be a long day.

He heads back to Baker afterwards in search of his platoon leaders to brief them on what's happening. He finds Inias first – who catches his eye with a look of relief.

“Inias,” he says, jogging over.

“Shit, I've been looking for you,” Inias starts up breathlessly, but Castiel interrupts him.

“We need to get Baker ready to move as soon as possible, we're moving out after Dog and Fox in the next hour,” Castiel tells him. “Can you get them moving?”

“Yeah, can do, but we got a bigger problem first,” Inias says. “According to the good old first sergeant, the supply officer still hasn't come to find us, and so a lot of the guys are on goddamn K-rations and nothing else, and if they're anything like me, they have been since--”

A couple feet behind Inias, the company's second medic, Ted du Mort, is wandering back from the battalion aid station is wiping blood off his hands with a dirty rag. It looks like something he might have torn off an enemy uniform at some point – Castiel can see him slowly dirty and blacken the insignia.

The blood is thick in some places where it has congealed; in others, up the inside of his wrists and along the backs of his hands, it is spattered indiscriminately. Du Mort scrubs and wipes, and Castiel watches as though from very far away as du Mort turns his hands over and over and over. And over.

“Hey – hey!” Inias is snapping his fingers in front of Castiel's face. “Jesus. Are you even listening to me?”

Castiel blinks at Inias. He clears his throat. “Yeah, sorry. I'm listening.”

“For Christ's sake. I mean, I know it's not the most interesting stuff but can you just pay attention to me for one goddamn second?”

“I'm listening,” Castiel says again, now irritated.

“Yeah? Good. Because we've got a real fucking problem if we're going hard for the battery again and half the company hasn't had a solid meal in twenty-four hours--”

Castiel starts. “What? Why not?”

“Fuck, Cas.”

“Look, I'm sorry, Inias, I've got a lot to--”

“No incoming supplies since the 29th, sir,” Inias says, his voice loud and slow, and Castiel hates the pointed, sarcastic that he says *sir*. “Now apparently we're okay for ammunition – God knows how we pulled that one off – but some people are seriously flagging for lack of rations.”

“Why am I only hearing about this today? Supplies should have come in on the 1st--”

Inias grimaces. “I'm sorry – okay, I knew you were busy, so me and

Virgil, we thought we could handle it if we didn't--”

“For Christ's sake,” Castiel says, and he walks off past Inias, who follows at a jog. “How many people?”

“Most of two-platoon. We got a couple of guys sharing but--”

“Get through today, I'll radio in to battalion after this assault.”

“We asked them two days ago, they gave us the *any day now, we're doing our best* spiel--”

“So ask again,” Castiel snaps, and then he leaves Inias behind to find the rest of his platoon leaders.

Virgil, Hester, Alistair, and Inias get Baker mobilised within twenty minutes and then they're out on fighting patrol again, in a long staggered formation that breaks up through the trees to keep them out of sight of enemy lines.

They pull into a small wooded area just short of La Trinité to re-group before the company moves out to assist Dog and Fox Companies in the attempt to flank the battery and take it from another side, but when Castiel calls together his platoon leaders and commanding NCOs, he is bewildered to find that he is only faced with Virgil, Hester, Sergeant Milligan, Inias, and First Sergeant Masters.

He frowns around the circle, and he waits a moment to see if Lieutenant Alistair will come running out of the trees somewhere to join them – but he doesn’t. Castiel looks back at his platoon leaders. “Where the hell is four-platoon?” he asks.

Virgil glances at Sergeant Masters. Inias frowns. The giveaway is Hester, who is careful to avoid Castiel's eyes, until at last he lets out a long, slow long, slow exhalation. “I don’t know.”

Castiel stares at him. “What?”

“Jesus. I said don't know, Castiel, I thought they were right behind us.”

Castiel does not panic. He feels it creep up inside him like a slow decay, but he doesn’t panic. Of course, they're already forty minutes late to their rendezvous point with the other companies – a result of accidentally falling asleep last night while map-reading and so misreading an entire contour during today's patrol – but he does not panic. He says, “Your orders were to ensure that your tail-end has a visual on their point at all times.”

“I thought we did! Look, I’m sorry.”

Castiel takes a deep breath. “But you've radioed in to make contact.”

“I can't get through, I don't know if it's their end or ours, but--”

“Virgil, gather all the company's radiomen and confirm frequencies,” Castiel says, talking clean over the end of Hester's sentence. “Wallace, check the map and see if there are any potential enemy positions past our patrol route where they might have got into trouble. Masters, put together a squad patrol to head back to the rallying point – Alistair knows the RVP, so we may have just missed them on our way past before we knew they were missing. Take a radioman with you. And Hester - get me your tail-end.”

Hester looks nonplussed. “What?”

“Who was it?” Castiel says, each word slow and deliberate.

“Shit. Ah – it was Donald Hanscum.”

“Bring him here.” Castiel can barely process what he's doing, but he realises that he has become dangerous. He can’t tamp down panic without anger flaring up in its place, and without consciously deciding to, he has settled into straight-spined fury with his jaw clenched tight. If he’s going to take the beating for this, he is not going alone.

As Hester turns away to head through the trees, there is the touch of a hand to Castiel’s elbow and he jumps.

“Cas, it’s fine,” Inias says. “We’ll find them.”

That isn’t the fucking point, and Castiel hates that Inias is patronising him with meaningless placations when the real problem – and its consequences - still has to be dealt with. “Yes, we’ll find them,” he snaps. “I wasn’t imagining a scenario in which our entire mortar platoon is killed or captured, although in complete honesty the way this day is going, it wouldn’t be a surprising turn of my luck – but our objective is now fucked. We are never going to get to our rendezvous on time at this point, which means one entire flank of that battery assault is unsupported and the Germans at that position can either outflank our guys and give them hell or slip away entirely. Jesus.” Castiel drops his head to his chest and runs a hand over the top of his helmet. “Fuck. Aren't you supposed to be checking the maps?”

“You’re gonna burst a goddamn blood vessel, Cas. Ease up. It’ll work

itself out," Inias is saying, but Castiel ignores him entirely, because he has caught sight of Hester making his way back towards him, with Private Hanscum in tow.

Castiel heads over to meet them halfway. "Private, where's four-platoon?"

Hanscum hesitates. "Not sure, sir."

"You're not sure?" Castiel echoes. "Tell me, private, what were your orders?"

Virgil comes jogging back from his briefing with the radiomen and comes to stand beside Castiel. "No interferences on our frequency, lieutenant, we're all good this end of the line."

Hanscum shifts his weight nervously from one foot to the other, glancing between Virgil and Castiel. "My orders were to keep a visual on four-platoon, I know, sir, but I thought they were there, I thought I just dropped them for a second, I didn't know I'd lost them—"

"What exactly is your definition, then, of keeping a visual, if by your understanding losing sight of men means the assumption that they're still behind you?"

"I thought they'd show up sooner or later, I thought they couldn't be far—"

"You're correct. At that point, they wouldn't have been far. We could have easily diverted the patrol to make contact with four-platoon – in a matter of minutes," Castiel starts angrily, and there is a nervous

hand to his shoulder. He tilts back to find Private Concino.

“Sir, I’ve got Major Campbell on the line,” Concino says, one hand covering the mouth-piece of his radio.

“I’m not here,” Castiel tells him, and turns back to Private Hanscum. “So now we have no idea where they are, or how far they may be, or how we are going to establish communications with them in order to proceed to the next objective. And what, exactly, are you going to—”

“Sir,” Concino raises his voice. “Campbell says it’s urgent he speak with you right away, what should I—?”

“One second, Concino, I just need to—”

From down the line comes Campbell's dulcet tones, crackling furiously. “Where the fuck is Lieutenant Novak? You get his ass on the line right now or I swear to Christ—”

Castiel picks up the mouth-piece. “Present, sir.”

“Novak, what the fuck is going on down there? Correct me if I’m wrong, but were you not supposed to be meeting Dog and Fox forty-seven minutes ago?”

“That’s correct, sir.”

“Then why the hell are you not there?”

“Communications problems, sir.”

Campbell scoffs. “What fucking communication problems? Can you hear me right now?”

“Loud and clear, sir, I—”

“Then your lines are fine. Your comms are fine. So what the fuck is the goddamn hold-up?”

Castiel takes a deep breath and steels himself for the inevitable blast wave. “We’ve lost four-platoon, sir.”

There is a beat where there is only silence, and then Campbell's voice down the radio is a swell of static and fury. “You lost an entire fucking platoon? How in the shit do you lose an entire fucking platoon, lieutenant? Are you a fucking imbecile?”

“Sir, we’re getting them back, the situation is under control, and we’ll be—”

“It’s not under control. If it was under control, you’d be at the rendezvous like you were supposed to be three-quarters of an hour ago, ready to move up to take that battery and kick the shit out of some unsuspecting Krauts. You need to get your shit together, Novak.”

Castiel’s jaw tightens. “Yes, sir.”

“You radio Dog and Fox to let them know you’re not coming – this is on you. And find your fucking platoon, fast. You need to clear the objective *today*, is that clear?”

“Yes, sir. Clear, sir.” Castiel thrusts the radio mouth-piece back at Private Concino and turns away to where the rest of the platoon leaders are still standing uncertainly, waiting for the next order. “Hester, take three-platoon back to where you last saw four-platoon – have Hanscum go point, see if he can remember anything – and radio in when you find them. Weapons and ammo only, leave the rest of the your gear with us. One- and two-platoon, lay down an all-round defensive here and wait for my next command.”

Castiel doesn't go with three-platoon; he sits with the rest of the company, with a map to one side and a waiting radioman on the other, and while he waits to hear back, he checks their route towards Dog and Fox. There's a battery they're tasked with tasking, which shouldn't be too difficult, except that it's in the sight-lines of Hill 103 and so could be at risk of heavy artillery assault from the naval guns at the Graf Spee Battery, so they need numbers on it to get in and out as quickly as possible before they're zeroed. The other companies of the 116th will just be waiting for Baker once they get in position, so Castiel can't afford any further mistakes.

Thankfully, it's only ten minutes or so before there is word through the radio of four-platoon being found, and then, on instruction to double-time it, only six minutes until Hester comes jogging back with four-platoon in tow, led by Alistair, who holds his rifle slightly off to one side since he took a chunk of shrapnel to the forearm a few days ago, but is otherwise fine.

Castiel folds his map away into his pocket and crosses to greet them. He gives Hester a short nod of gratitude, with a quick order to get the rest of the Baker ready to move, and then he turns to Alistair. “What the hell happened to you?”

Alistair flashes him a gritty, razor-sharp smile. “Novak, it's been a hell of a day. Don't.” He moves to sidestep Castiel, but Castiel moves with him, touches his fingertips to his chest, dead-centre. Alistair comes to a halt at the calm, but unflinching touch of Castiel's hand. His eyes narrow. “Alright. I don't know what happened. Somehow we mis-navigated, ended up a whole click off to the north, and we got engaged by a small patrol force off the MSR through Saint-Renan.”

Castiel drops his hand back to his side. “Casualties, ammunition?”

“We're alright for ammunition – they were a small rifle squad, maybe five, seven guys, and meanwhile there's thirty of us with light artillery and mortars, so it was quick work, but we lost Deeks. And Corporal Montgomery fucked up his leg pretty badly.”

That's not good. Castiel is already far behind schedule, and long overdue for a colossal reprimand – he doesn't need Baker to be any later than they already are, but maybe it just isn't Castiel's day. “Is he mobile?” Castiel asks.

Alistair raises his eyebrows. “Not really.”

“Shit.” Castiel glances around as though he's expecting the answer to simply drop from the sky. “We're miles from the nearest aid station...” He has a moment of weakness; he closes his eyes. This isn't happening. This is a bad dream.

“There must be scout cars nearby – we can radio him in with them, unless you want us to drop him to the the rear of the line and leave him there,” Alistair says, and Castiel thinks he sounds slightly too enthusiastic about that second idea.

Castiel sighs. “No,” he says, eyes on a figure in the distance that

slowly advances towards them. He can't call in a scout car because then his superior officers will hear that not only did Castiel get lost and lose track of an entire platoon, his actions also resulted in one fatality and one injury, and if they get any further wind of how severe a fuck-up this has been, then Castiel has no idea of the consequences. He isn't a liar, but he isn't about to go down for something that isn't his fault. He inhales deeply. “We'll figure it out.”

He dismisses Alistair, tells him to get in contact with Sergeant Masters for an update on how his platoon is doing, and then he walks away. He has to come up with some genius scheme for how to make the next rendezvous point on time, without drawing any further attention to this whole disaster, with an injury.

Dread sinks through him the longer he thinks about it, because it is becoming apparent that there is only one answer, and so, reluctantly, he goes to find Dean.

He is standing around with Ted du Mort and a couple of the replacement privates, and from the sounds of it he's busy trying to scare the crap out of them with medical stories. “--and there was this one time where this guy – Ted, you remember Pat Barnes? Yeah – he got a chunk taken out of his leg. Disgusting, totally disgusting, but the worst of it was when we had to peel back--”

“Winchester,” Castiel calls out, and once he sees Dean's head turn to follow him, he says, “Come with me,” and turns to set off without waiting for him. Dean comes jogging to catch up, and as he falls into step, Castiel tells him the situation. “I need you to stabilise Corporal Montgomery for movement.”

“Uh, yes, sir. Is there a scout car coming from battalion to take him back?”

“We're taking him with us,” Castiel says, off-hand, and then he turns to Dean. “Anyway – that'll be all, sergeant.”

However, as usual, Dean doesn't take the hint as to when he's been dismissed, and he just keeps walking alongside Castiel. “Wait – what? Sir, he's broken his leg--”

“Do you think I don't know that?”Castiel asks tiredly.

“But then why are we--”

Castiel sighs, and he doesn't know why, but he tells Dean. “We can't leave him here, and we can't call in to battalion because if they get any more word of what a colossal disaster this is, I'll lose my job, and I do not deserve to get demoted just because Donald Hanscum couldn't keep his goddamn eyes on four-platoon. Now can you get him ready to move or not?”

Dean tilts his chin up. He exposes the long line of his throat, shiny with sweat and camouflage grease. “Can do, sir.”

Castiel swallows and looks away. “Then do it.” He points in the direction of the wounded corporal, and then jogs off towards where the rest of the company is formed up and waiting to go.

They move out as soon as Dean and du Mort have Montgomery mobilised, and they double-time the remaining miles to the rendezvous with Fox and Dog. Castiel runs ahead while Lieutenant Virgil assembles Baker in an appropriate assault formation, and finds Dog and Fox stationed behind a low hedgerow a quarter-mile or so short of the battery. He gets an NCO to direct him towards the commanding officers, and he finds Major Isaacs and Captain Laufeyson east along the line, looking out through binoculars.

“Nice of you to finally join us,” Gabriel says, grinning as Castiel slides down the embankment to meet them. “We're having ourselves a nice little picnic here, thinking about--”

“How does it look?” Castiel interrupts, and he digs in his combat jacket for his own binoculars. “Any further intel?”

Gabriel snorts at Castiel's brusqueness, but Castiel supposes that by this point he is not surprised that Castiel isn't one for small-talk.

Major Isaacs points. “Five guns, one on each side except for the south, which has two. Trench system around the rear, a handful of guns on MG-40s this side of the trench – not sure about the other sides, but it seems like that's where their fire concentration is. There's either a sniper or a damn good marksman inside, mostly covering the eastern side, which we figure is their weakest point.” He glances up at Castiel, and his expression hardens. “And a lot of S-mines.”

Castiel exhales slowly. “Good. What are we doing?”

They move out almost immediately – Dog taking the east, Baker the west and coming through the trench system, Fox on reserve and suppressive fire. Castiel eyes the 88mm guns where their barrels project into the sky, cutting through the pale light of an overcast afternoon, and for once he is not envious of those on reserve.

He briefs his platoon leaders as they patrol forwards. “We're taking the trench system from the west. I want smoke on the trench's sight-line as soon as possible, and I want mortars into the trench until we break up their base of fire – get ready to switch fire when you get the order from the trench teams. Two-platoon flanks the trench from the right – there should be a draw in somewhere on the south-western

corner, but the area around it is going to be a goddamn mine-field, so go carefully – proven route only, and minesweepers where possible, but there's not going to be a lot of time. I want one- and three-platoon straight in on the 88, but keep low. Someone in that battery is a very good shot."

"Cas," Inias says. "Aren't we in view of Hill 103 here?"

Castiel looks over at him. "Like I said – we don't have a lot of time."

Inias sighs.

Castiel considers dropping back in formation to find Dean, asking if Montgomery is okay, but it wouldn't do anybody any good. Castiel already knows how Montgomery is doing – he's probably in a lot of pain, wishes he were unconscious, and wishes that the company would stop dragging him around unnecessarily. That's just too bad.

He calls for smoke, and he sends the mortars back towards the trees, and then everyone is peeling away from formation to run into position. He holds back with Harry Spangler as radioman and runner to supervise the attack, finding a place in the tree-line short of the battery where he can watch the whole thing unfold.

It's time like this that he hates being in command – give him his rifle and the ability to run around with the rest of them, and he feels he can do a fine job being in control of the attack; leave him back here to issue orders from a distance and he just feels useless. However, he's been informed by Major Singer that he's taking too many risks. A commanding officer shouldn't be in the field, Singer says. That's for platoon-leaders and first sergeants. Castiel hates it.

He watches it begin in force – the indistinct yell of NCOs moving their

squads up; the blurred movements of four-platoon's mortar-teams setting up their charges; the flurry of enemy soldiers running along their trench system to get at their weapons. There is the dull thudding as they set off their light mortars, and two-platoon is cut off on their way forwards, the explosions cutting through their advance – and their heavier guns boom and spit shells that crash to earth loud enough to hurt Castiel's ears, and two-platoon's line is entirely shattered as they pull back from the gun's zeroing.

There is four-platoon hunched over their mortar-tripods, firing charge after charge into the German position, with no sign of causing any last damage. The shells kick up smoke and dirt, and the enemy line doesn't so much as waver. There is Sergeant Milligan driving first squad forwards – Castiel's own platoon, back before he was forced into becoming CO – and there is the chatter of machine gunfire sweeping across them in a long line that takes out Private Alborn's knees in a blunt red spray. There is the yell for a medic.

Two-platoon weaves around through the trees on the left side of the advancing line, sprinting so fast that the men are indistinguishable from each other – quick-moving silhouettes that twist and yell – and then an S-mine spikes up into the air. Castiel jerks forwards, mouth open to scream something, but he can't get a word out before it explodes and there is metal through three different soldiers. His breath snags in his throat.

“Fuck,” Castiel whispers. His eyes dart left and right, frantic to see some kind of cheat – some tactical position he hadn't noticed before, a strategic advantage of some kind – and he feels his chest tighten with panic. He has one hand supported himself on the trunk of a tree half-shredded by artillery fire, and he holds on so tight his fingernails hurt. *“Fuck.”*

He should be down there. He should be urging the men forwards, telling them where to go, getting them out of range of the 88s and making sure that they don't get caught in a goddamn fucking minefield – and he's back here instead, some twenty feet rear of the front-line, and he can't do anything.

He twists to call for the radioman stationed nearby. “Spangler – what's Dog Company's position on this?”

Spangler pulls his mouthpiece around from the back of his radio, and as he shouts into it, Castiel turns back to watch the attack unfolding. He watches one-platoon, firing and firing, and he can see the head snap back of a single man behind the German lines, but otherwise there is no real effect. They're shooting into the dark.

“They need a better base of fire and they need four-platoon a lot closer,” Castiel mutters to himself, but he can't pass the message on as Spangler is still on the line to Dog Company. For now, he can only wait. He watches as three-platoon move up slowly, crawling forwards a few feet at a time through the tall grass, and he's urging them on under his breath when the air is torn by a deafening roar overhead.

It grows louder and louder until it feels that Castiel's head is about to split, and he watches his men freeze below like startled rabbits. Spangler is grabbing at his arm, saying something about Dog Company with urgency, but Castiel isn't listening.

“Take cover,” he yells, loud enough that his voice cracks, but it's lost in the sound of the fire-fight, and then the shell hits. The column of smoke that explodes upwards is twenty feet tall, and in spite of the distance, the concussion waves run through Castiel like a shiver. He doesn't need to look south to know that it's the Graf Spee Battery's 280mm, and he doesn't need to wait for the smoke to clear to know that it's going to devastate his entire company. “Take cover, get out of the way!”

Castiel is struggling to breathe, and he knows he is going to have to sound a retreat. He is crouched some twenty feet rear of the front-line as Baker tries to push up towards La Trinité, and he is watching them get annihilated.

Spangler holds out his radio mouth-piece. “Sir, no word from Dog but Fox Company are pushing forwards--”

Castiel pushes the mouth-piece back at him. “Get onto battalion about what the fuck we're supposed to do about Graf Spee,” he snaps at him.

His orders are to take this battery today – regimental staff thinks that the 2nd Battalion have already wasted too much time on La Trinité, and they want it cleared – but there is no way his men can push through a well-guarded German fortress while simultaneously being fired on from heavy naval artillery some five miles away that they can't defend themselves from. It's not only impossible, it's outright insane – and he's not doing it from back here.

Castiel shoves past Spangler to take off running towards the fire-fight. He heads for four-platoon first, sprints so hard that his legs ache and he thinks he'll outrun his own feet, he'll trip and fall, but somehow he gets there. He skids, drops to one knee, and he's yelling in Alistair's good ear - “Move up, you're having no effect on the enemy base of fire in the trenches, you've gotta move up!” - and then he's off again.

The next shell comes screaming in overhead, and Castiel knows that they are beyond running out of time. The success of this assault was in being able to almost clear the position before the 280mm on Hill 103 realised what they were doing, and battalion intelligence had assured them that there was no communications between La Trinité and Graf Spee, but Castiel and the other companies are barely five minutes into this attack and they're getting decimated.

The naval gun's shell crashes to earth, and it takes Castiel's legs out from underneath him. He falls inelegantly down, scratches his hand up landing on a thin shred of shrapnel embedded in the dirt, and as he rolls over to scramble back onto his feet, he hears machine-gun rounds clattering nearby, and he knows he has to move fast. The smoke has

not yet cleared, and someone is screaming.

Castiel moves towards the sound of their voice, ducked low for fear of that marksman in the bunker – he couldn't more obviously be the company commanding officer if he shouted it in German – and he finds Sergeant Lafitte on his back in the dirt with a dark bloody chunk out of his thigh and no leg below the knee.

“Fuck,” Lafitte exclaims, struggling to breathe, and he's shaking so much that Castiel has to hold his head still to hear what he's saying. “Where's Private – Jackman? Where's Jackman, he was right in front of – fuck, sir, you gotta--”

There is no sign of Private Jackman – he's gone. Castiel twists at the waist, yells for a medic until his voice cracks, and then the air is thundering with the sound of the next shell coming in. Castiel looks back for the rest of the company, but the sky is thick with smoke and debris as mortars go off, and he can't get a good picture of what's happening.

He can see four-platoon moving up on his order; he can see one of the mortar-men's getting his throat cut out by machine-gun fire. He sees Private Rosen faltering as he runs after his squad – swerving left, swerving right, in his attempt to get away from the still-falling mortars of the German lines, and he takes a bullet through his stomach that knocks him back. He sees another S-mine launch itself sharply into the air.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this. There was supposed to be bad communications. This was supposed to be the move that got them the battery. Castiel's breath is coming quicker and quicker with panic, and he realises that he's shaking, and he doesn't know what to do.

“Sir, you gotta get Private Jackman,” Benny is saying over and over,

and the colour is draining from his face, and Castiel knows that the sergeant is going into shock. “Sir, he was right in front of me, he got hit too, you gotta--”

“Yeah,” Castiel says, even though he knows that there is near enough nothing left of Jackman. His voice is unsteady as he applies pressure against the feebly spurting hole in Sergeant Laffite's leg. “Yeah, I'll get him. First though, we need to get you out of here...” He turns and yells for a medic again, and then he decides. They can't do this. There is no way this can be done without losing everyone in his company. He takes a deep breath and screams, *pull back, pull back.*

They don't need telling twice.

Baker scatters, everyone sprinting as the next shell comes screaming in overhead. Ted du Mort comes running towards Castiel with sulfa powder and bandages, and is twisting a tourniquet around Benny's thigh before Castiel knows what else to do. Du Mort glances up and offers a calm smile in spite of the chaos. He says, “You get out of here, sir, we'll be right after you!”

Castiel climbs up onto his feet and he stumbles, but then he catches himself and he sets out running. He's slow at first, not sure where he's going, but there is gunfire behind him and he knows he's running away from that. He takes a deep breath as he runs, even though he feels although every gasp is being dragged from some place deep and painful. His heart is hammering so hard that he feels his pulse heavily inside his skull, and he shouts out again. “Pull back, pull back, come on – let's go!”

Lance Corporal Caudry trips as he runs, catching his foot inside the opening of a rabbit-warren, and he snaps his ankle; Private Bradbury hauls him up onto his shoulder, but Bradbury's only small, and he runs with Corporal Harvelle behind him to prop Caudry's weight up.

“Come on, come on, let's go!” Castiel shouts, and he reaches out to grab Bradbury as he comes running with Harvelle and Private Caudry, and then there is the sharp hiss of a bullet coming too close. Bradbury squawks, and then collapses, Private Oliver coming down on top of him – screaming as his broken ankle hits the ground.

“Oh, crap--” Bradbury struggles underneath Caudry, but then Dean is there – hauling Caudry carefully onto his feet and passing him off to Corporal Harvelle to carry; flipping Bradbury unceremoniously over to check the entry wound.

“Shit!” Dean exclaims, but for some reason he's laughing, and even as he digs through his bag for bandages and sulfa powder he's giggling to himself like a fucking idiot - and then Castiel realises that Bradbury's been shot in the ass.

Castiel isn't laughing. He shoves hard at Dean's shoulder and snaps, “Winchester, get him out of here!” and then he runs back to see if anyone is still coming off the front-line. No living soldiers. There are bodies – and Castiel's stomach turns over, his blood running cold, because there are a lot of bodies – but there's no time to go get them as the air rumbles with the next incoming naval shell.

He swallows past the nausea and keeps going.

They run for the final rendezvous point that they set out before they moved for the assault, and they re-group there with noise and panic. The wounded are being set out on the dirt with infantry and medics alike frantically trying to patch up injuries. Platoon leaders are setting out the all-round defensive, and First Sergeant Masters is running around to make sure that all casualties are accounted for, that there is enough ammunition to fend off a counter-attack if they have to. Castiel can still hear the deafening crash of the 280mm's shells hitting the ground behind them, and there is blood mixed in with the soil.

Castiel's hands are slick with Sergeant Lafitte's blood and he doesn't know how to get them clean. He wipes them off on his combat jacket, but it doesn't help. He inhales shakily and he tries to hold himself still, but his knees are wavering underneath.

Somehow, he keeps it together. He goes to Sergeant Masters for a report on how the men are doing – low morale but mostly fine – and to Winchester for a report on the casualties, but he's busy. He's still wrestling with the more severe injuries, and he has Spangler on the radio to the battalion aid station, bringing a deuce-and-a-half around as soon as possible to pick up the wounded.

“It should be here in five, ten minutes tops,” Spangler tells him, one hand braced over the mouth-piece of the radio as he glances up at Castiel.

Castiel nods. He opens his mouth to say something, but he doesn't know what to say. He's struggling to keep his eyes focused on any one thing. He just keeps moving.

They're safe enough for now in this position. Technically, the naval guns can still reach them here, but Castiel doesn't think they'd be likely to waste ammunition when they can't be sure of where Baker has retreated to. The platoon-leaders are looking after their men, and the medical transport will be here imminently, and there is not a lot else for Castiel to think about – aside from radio-ing in to find out how Dog and Fox are doing, and what they plan to do next, and how on earth they're ever going to take this battery if they can't get more support from the rest of the division, and what Castiel is going to do with his company now that they've lost about fifteen men.

Castiel can't breathe. He can't breathe. There is so much still to be done, and he can't do it. He is distantly aware that he says something to Lieutenant Virgil, and that he pushes past Inias, and then he is walking off through the trees.

He doesn't know where he's going until he stumbles, and he throws a hand out to steady himself, catching a low-hanging branch. He ducks under it, takes slow steps towards it, and then drops to sit on a root that rises, gnarled, out of the dirt. It's uncomfortable, but sitting helps. Castiel pulls up his legs close to his chest, and he breathes.

He's doing fine. He's alive. He hasn't lost any of his officers. He still has most of his NCOs – and there in his head is the image of Benny Laffite, white and shuddering in the dirt, and he swallows past it. He's doing fine.

Castiel rubs a hand over the side of his neck, and it's only when he feels the jittery touch of his fingers that he recognises he's shaking. He clenches and unclenches his hands, and he watches the subtle pull of muscle through his skin. There are the bones of his hand, the metacarpals; there is the muscle flexing in his wrist as he rolls his thumb. None of it seems as real as the blood engrained into his palms.

He swallows. Takes off his helmet, drops it at his side. He pushes a hand backwards through his hair, greasy and sweat-damp as it is, slightly itchy where blood from his tree-burst injury has dried. He pulls in a deep breath and digs into his combat jacket for his cigarette tin, but he doesn't get as far as finding himself a cigarette. He holds the tin in two hands and flicks at the dented corner with both thumbs. It calms him, but only slightly. He feels as though he is spiralling.

Of course, it isn't long until he's disturbed – he could never be allowed more than ten minutes peace and quiet to himself, or it seems the world would spontaneously implode – and Castiel closes his eyes with a long, deep breath in order to compose himself. He has to be stone again. He has to be unbreakable.

“Sir?”

It is Dean's voice, and Castiel opens his eyes.

Dean stands a couple of feet away, one hand on that same low branch, and he doesn't say anything further. He just looks at Castiel, and his expression is so hesitant, so gentle, that Castiel can't look at him.

He looks down at the cigarette tin in his hands and he clumsily pries it open. He pulls out a cigarette and his lighter, and he snaps the tin closed to light up, but he has too many things in his hands all at the same time and he's fumbling. He drops the lighter. Castiel tucks the cigarette between two fingers, stows the tin in his jacket, and he's just reaching to retrieve the lighter when Dean – ducking under the branch – beats him to it.

Castiel slumps back against the tree trunk, too tired to complain, and he doesn't complain when Dean wordlessly crouches in front of him and flicks the flame on. Castiel puts the cigarette to his lips and lets Dean lean into him to light it. They both pretend not to notice Castiel's violently trembling hands.

It takes a good few seconds for the cigarette to catch, and then Castiel tips his head back to rest against the tree, exhaling smoke through his nose. The first drag doesn't help; he lifts a hand to steady the cigarette and sucks the smoke in again. He holds it in for as long as possible, lets it burn until he feels he could cough, and then he swallows the itch of it down. Holds it longer. Breathes out.

“Doing that's bad for you,” Dean says.

Castiel catches his eyes. He does the same again.

Dean makes a huffing noise in the back of his throat, like he didn't expect anything different from Castiel and doesn't know why he was surprised at his obstinacy. He lays down the lighter by Castiel's boot, and then, with a lot of dramatic groaning, he heaves himself over, turns, and drops heavily to sit down cross-legged in the grass beside Castiel.

“Fuck, what a day,” Dean says. He looks over at Castiel. “I mean, the casualties that really scar you are never the ones you thought they'd be. You know that I saw Adam's balls this morning?” When Castiel doesn't answer, he just keeps going. “He fell climbing over a foxhole, landed on Charlie's rifle muzzle. Hell, though, I'm just glad Charlie didn't have his goddamn bayonet fitted. Even without it, everything was all bruised, the poor guy can barely walk, for Christ's sake--”

“Dean. I don't want to hear about Sergeant Milligan's testicles.”

“Oh yeah?” Dean smiles. “What is it that gets you going, sir? You wanna hear about Quentin's infection instead? Because I swear to God, I don't know who or what that guy's been fucking, but it feels like once a goddamn month he's got rashes, he's got burning sensations--”

Castiel knows that Dean is just rambling to distract him, but for now he doesn't care. It seems to be working, to some extent, and against his better judgement, he is glad to have Dean with him. He stretches out a hand over his knee, watches the shift of bone and muscle. He lowers his hand.

“--and so that's when I told him, in all seriousness, he needs to start washing regularly or things down there are gonna need chopping off. Like, I know none of us have too good hygiene right about now, what with there being no hot baths exactly handy, but honestly, even when we had the opportunity – in Saint Lo, even in Grandcamp, I don't think Quentin went for it. That's disgusting.”

“That is disgusting,” Castiel agrees.

Dean's grin widens, and out of Castiel's peripheral vision, he can see Dean watching him for several seconds with that broad smile. To some degree, it irritates him – that Dean can eternally bounce around like he's the happiest guy in the world, like he never has a bad day in his life.

Castiel tries to rack his brain, then, to figure out if he's ever seen Dean in a bad mood. It's hard to measure – every instance where Castiel thinks of an argument they've had, it is the same: Castiel snapping at him, Dean sitting back with good-humour and patience to take it all in. Letting Castiel vent until he's empty enough that the fight goes out of him. Castiel wonders if Dean has always been this way. Always putting everybody else first. Appearing completely without personal concerns so that he can better take care of other people.

“So did you hear the one about the magic tractor?” Dean starts up conversationally.

It's so out of the blue that Castiel has no idea what's happening. He turns to him. “What?”

“It was driving down the road when it suddenly turned into a field!” Dean finishes, and his face splits into a wide grin. “Yeah? It turned into a field, you get it?”

“I get it,” Castiel tells him, too tired to humour him. “It isn't funny.”

Dean heaves a melodramatic sigh. “Okay. Fine. Let's try again. So a man walks into a bar holding a piece of asphalt. He goes to up to the barkeep, says, 'I'll have a beer, please, and on for the road'!”

Castiel doesn't laugh; he just shakes his head.

“No? Look, I got more, sir – Sam sends me them constantly. I got more bad jokes than you could think up in your wildest dreams.”

“I'll take your word for it.”

“Why did the scarecrow get promoted?”

Castiel lets out a harsh breath. “Do you have any that aren't about farms? I feel like you're almost asking me to say something derogatory about Kansas.”

Dean raises his eyebrows, but the incredulous way he laughs then has a note of relief in it. Castiel tries not to think about how much of a mess he must seem if Dean is genuinely relieved to see him being a grumpy asshole. “Respectfully, sir,” Dean says, and he holds up a warning finger, “I'll kick your ass..”

Castiel puts his cigarette back to his lips, mumbles around it, “I'd like to see you try.”

“Don't test me, sir – I got a little brother back home that I've been wrestling with since he was old enough to walk, and he's twice the size of you,” Dean says.

“A little brother?”

Dean pulls a face. “Yeah, I know. Don't ask me what happened. A freak storm, I don't know. He's giant and I hate him every day for it.”

“How tall?”

“Last time I was there? Six foot one. But he's still shooting up like a weed, and it's been a while since I've been back, so.”

In spite of Dean's flippant tone, Castiel can hear how much that last part hurts him. He doesn't ask how long it's been, but tries to work it out in his head. A year in England; two years basic training, unless he went home on furlough while they were still on US soil. That gets Castiel to thinking about the last time he saw Bedford, and he can see the long boulevard, oak trees lining the pavement and drooping with autumn, but he doesn't know what year it is, in his memory. His mother is alive in the fresh blue paint on their wooden house, in the neatly maintained flowerbeds, so it's at least five years in the past.

Castiel doesn't want to think about his mother. He takes a deep breath, and he looks over at Dean. “So why did the scarecrow get promoted?”

This time, Dean's smile is a slow-growing thing. His eyes are soft. “He was outstanding in his field.”

“Of course he was.”

“That's one of Sam's favourites, I must've heard it ten thousand times.” Dean shakes his head. “God, it pissed me off, then. '*Quit telling the same jokes over and over! Get a new book or shut the hell up!'* He'd still cackle like an idiot even with me telling him he's not funny, like, at all.” The smile begins to fade. “It seems funnier now than back then.”

“You miss him,” Castiel says, after a moment.

Dean laughs. “Uh. Yeah.” However, his smile continues to fade, and Castiel realises that Dean being far from his brother isn't the sum of the issue. Dean turns his face down towards his hands. The rise and fall of his shoulders is steady as ever, but tense.

Castiel watches him. “What is it?”

Dean's eyes flicker over to Castiel's, perhaps slightly startled at Castiel having been shrewd enough to notice his unease. “What?”

“Something with your family?”

Dean tries another small laugh, twists his mouth. “Uh. Actually – there's some shit going on with my dad, back home. Well, mostly it's my dad.”

He gives Castiel that broad, lopsided grin that is supposed to be taken to mean that everything is okay, but Castiel doesn't fall for it. “And?”

“Okay. He's – he's arguing with Sam again. Real badly from what I can tell, and I guess it's just. On my mind a little at the moment.” He raises his eyebrows. “There. Happy?”

Castiel looks at him evenly. “You wish were there.”

“Well. Yeah, I do. I mean, I wish I could fix it, you know? But it's pretty hard to do anything from over here.” Dean's face scrunches up slightly at the nose and brow, and Castiel is almost overtaken by the urge to touch him – his jaw or his hand, maybe brush his thumb over Dean's hairline. He settles for leaning over, nudging Dean with his shoulder.

“What happened?”

Dean shrugs. “Nothing unusual.” He squints up at the sky where it is dappled through the trees, glimpses of blue-grey cloud amongst the leaves. “My dad got a little drunk, said a bunch of dumb shit – shit about Sam wanting to leave the family, shit about me already being gone and useless too – that kind of stuff. You know.” He looks over at Castiel, and it is apparent by the easy set of his face that he is waiting for Castiel to agree. Castiel doesn't.

“What?” he says, and when Dean only stares blankly at him: “Your father said that?”

Dean frowns. “Said what?”

“All that. That you're – useless.” Even the weight of it in Castiel's mouth is more than he wants to think about. Castiel's own father was a heartbreaking disappointment, but in the days before he left, he had been good to Castiel, if distant and elusive. He had never said anything like that.

“Oh.” Dean rolls his eyes. “That. Yeah, well. I mean, technically, he's not wrong, right?”

Castiel stares at him. “You're not useless.”

Dean's face screws up again, and he flaps a dismissive hand. “Ehh. Totmato-tomahto.”

“You're not,” Castiel says, and he can't believe he has to say this. He can't believe this is even a question.

“I mean. Come on. I'm out here fighting the good fight, but I'm not actually doing any fighting – and I'm playing at being a doctor, sure, but I'm not really a doctor either.” Dean reels it off, easy. “My dad figures I'd have been better off staying in Lawrence if good old Uncle Sam didn't even want me for anything important.”

Castiel's throat feels tight, his mouth dry, and he doesn't know what to say. “Dean,” he says.

Dean tilts away from him. “What? Don't look at me like that, you know it's--”

“You're making sure that as many of us as possible get to go home at the end of this,” Castiel says. “Dean, you're doing the only thing that's worthwhile here.”

For a moment, Dean just looks at him, and there is a softness to his expression that makes him seem painfully young. Twenty-three, Castiel reminds himself.

Dean ducks his head, and after a beat, he lets out a low laugh. “Shit, sir, I should get you to write to him.”

Rashly, Castiel wishes he could. He knows where he'd start. He doesn't say that, however, and instead opts to open his cigarette tin. “Smoke?” he asks, and he holds it out to Dean.

Dean plucks one out, surprisingly careful, and as he holds it between two fingers, he scratches a brown mark off his thumbnail. Castiel can't tell if it's dirt or blood.

Castiel reaches across to light his cigarette, one hand cupped to shelter the flame, and he only allows himself a single glance at the curve of Dean's mouth as he sucks at the cigarette end. He looks over, and he can't look away. Dean takes the cigarette from his lips and exhales pale smoke.

“What's that little weird one for?” Dean asks, and Castiel's eyes snap up to his face before going to follow his gaze.

There is still one half-cigarette stub in at the far end of Castiel's cigarette tin, but somehow the idea of his old sentimentality seems too stupid to tell Dean about. Dean will think he's ridiculous, or crazy, or both. Dean will laugh at him. “Long story,” he says.

Dean jerks one shoulder in a lazy approximation of a shrug, but he doesn't press the issue. He takes another long, slow drag on his cigarette. “Shit. I wish I knew what to say to my dad,” he says. “I mean – shit, you probably know this already but I'm, uh. I'm not good with words and shit like that. Not good at explaining things the way they are in my head.” He glances over at Castiel. “You probably already know that.”

“Not necessarily.” Castiel arches his eyebrows. “If anything, I think you talk too much.”

Dean shoves at him with his shoulder, and it's so wildly unprofessional that Castiel should be angry, but it does the opposite – it fills him up to the throat with a giddy lightness he hasn't felt in a long time. Slowly, he realises that he is smiling.

“That's different,” Dean says. He lifts his hand, cigarette trapped between two knuckles and smouldering, and he points it at Castiel. “You, you're never gonna get me to shut up. That's different, though. That's the way to your heart, so--”

“That is not the way to my heart,” Castiel objects.

Dean grins. “Oh, yeah?”

“Absolutely not. You'll have to try much harder.” Castiel has no idea where he is finding the levity – or even the energy – to do this, to joke with Dean like this, but he thinks it a far better use of his energy than killing Germans. He likes this better.

“You're saying I didn't get this far on my sweet words and charm?” Dean laughs. “Must've been my good looks.”

Castiel rolls his eyes. He looks down at his cigarette, which burned out quite a while ago, and he reaches into his jacket for his lighter, but changes his mind. He doesn't need to keep smoking. He's okay for then. He opens his cigarette tin and puts the cigarette back inside.

Dean sees him do it. “What, you need two lucky smokes now? How unlucky can one guy be?”

“It's not lucky,” Castiel tells him as he puts it back in his jacket. “I'm

saving it for later."

"And the other one?"

Castiel pauses. "Also saving for later."

Dean's mouth pulls down thoughtfully. "Alright." He stubs out his cigarette on the sole of his boot and pushes it behind his ear. "We should really head back. You doing alright now, sir?"

Castiel looks sharply at him. "I'm fine."

"I know that," Dean says, and his face is the picture of innocence.

Castiel scrutinises him. That face insists that he hadn't been suggesting that anything was wrong with Castiel, that Castiel is in perfect health and that Dean was simply covering all his bases by asking questions. That face is entirely sincere, and if Dean is thinking of Castiel's unsteady hands and shaky breathing, that face doesn't show it.

"Yeah," he says, after a beat. "Let's go."

They head back to the rest of the company together, and they don't say anything to each other, but Castiel is comfortable with the silence. Having Dean beside him is enough. He doesn't feel as though he's vibrating out of his skin anymore, and that means the world to him.

Dean slaps a hand to the back of Castiel's shoulder – over his shrapnel scar, which hurts – and heads off towards three-platoon to find Ted du

Mort to check up on medical equipment, and Castiel watches him go. He turns away, not sure where of he's going, and he finds himself nearly walking into Inias. It makes him jump.

“Inias,” Castiel says.

“Everything okay?” Inias asks. His eyes flick from Castiel's face to some space over his shoulder, and Castiel doesn't need to turn around to know that he's looking at Dean.

“Everything's great,” Castiel says, opting to act as though he has no idea why Inias is in a bad temper. What's going on?”

“A lot, actually. Major Campbell is looking for you.”

Castiel starts. “When?”

“Uh – five minutes ago. Also, about twelve minutes ago, and then one other times besides. Maybe a half hour? Maybe just under that, I don't know. I was busy, so I wasn't paying all that much attention until, you know, I realised you were gone.” Inias raises his eyebrows. “Did you have fun?”

Castiel's heart sinks. “Inias, we weren't--”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. I get it.” Inias pats a hand to Castiel's forearm, and he flashes Castiel a quick smile that fades too quickly at the edges of his mouth. It doesn't reach his eyes. “Look, I gotta go find Charlie Company – something about ammunition, I don't know, but Masters' has fucked up his foot and can't go ask in person – but you can tell me all about what you weren't doing later, right?”

“Inias,” Castiel tries again, but he's gone.

Castiel sighs. He scrubs a hand down over his face before he remembers – Dean's gesture, Dean's mannerisms – and he goes to scratch at the back of his neck instead. He doesn't need any more of Dean filtering into everything he does.

Chapter 10: Brest: La Trinité

Chapter Notes

> warnings: an instant of violence – like, obviously there's war-is-hell, battle violence, but like... vaguely uncomfortable abusive-esque violence – see end for further notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

4 th September, 1944

Dear Sam,

I can't write much, so this is gonna be a quick one – we're moving out soon and I got like maybe five-ten minutes to scribble something quick before the mail staff disappear to the back of the line. Things are pretty rough here. We're not doing too well, but like I said, I can't say much. We got some crossed wires recently, and our objectives are a little fucked, and we've been losing some of the guys. Benny got hit the other day. He's okay – I mean, he's alive, so he's fine. He's off the line, though – lost a leg. It seems a little cruel seeing as things are already shit for him at home, but I'm gonna visit him whenever I can. On the bright side, Charlie got shot in the ass, which is fucking hilarious, so there.

I told Novak some of your jokes the other day, and you know, I think he loved them. It's always kind of hard to tell – you know, he's real quiet and he doesn't smile a lot – but I feel like I've almost cracked him. See, he does this thing when I make a joke sometimes, where he looks away, usually like up and to the side, and I've figured that means he thinks I'm funny – 'cause he doesn't want me to see him laugh or something like that. It's complicated, I dunno, but I'm convinced he does think I'm funny. He liked the one about the scarecrow – outstanding in his field. I thought you'd like to hear that. At least someone appreciates you, right?

I gotta go now. Congrats on your test, I'm so proud of you. I knew you'd ace it, so there's no need to be such a goddamn worry-wart, okay? For real.

You're a good kid. Say hi to Jessica for me, I hope she's feeling better. Don't start anything with dad. We'll speak soon. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

5th September, 1944

There is no more time for waiting. At oh-three-hundred, when the air is still sharp with cold and all in black, the 2nd Battalion of the 116th coordinate for attack. Baker Company lines up, platoon by platoon in a file four columns wide, and they kneel in place as they wait for the order to move out.

The men tie strips of white fabric around their upper arms so as not to lose sight of each other in the impenetrable gloom before the sun comes up, and they paint their faces with grease and with camouflage cream – which seems somewhat incongruous to Castiel, but he's not one to disagree with orders. He cams up, painting long diagonal streaks to break up the shape of his face. He doesn't feel at all ready to disappear into the dark.

La Trinité has proved impossible to take via the usual methods, and six days of near incessant shelling has reaped more casualties than progress. They're running out of time, resources, and most importantly, out of men, and so for some reason General Middleton's response was not to allocate more support, but rather order a direct assault on the battery at La Trinité by the entire regiment. The order of the day is stealth – no artillery set-up, no light, no noise. Bayonets fixed; rifles used sparingly until necessary. Castiel is dreading it.

He has been up all night orchestrating this with the other company

commanding officers as well as with battalion staff – discussing the position of known guns and sentry points; laying out mine-tape along their route to keep the hundreds of patrolling soldiers on track. Castiel wipes cam-cream onto his ears and goes over the plan in his head. 1st Battalion looping around to the west, 3rd to the west. 2nd Battalion to the south, where the fortress is the weakest, and similarly, where the majority of the 40mm guns are known to be stationed. Able straight to the guns with Dog; Baker and Fox on the trench-system at the forefront; Easy and Charlie in reserve for suppressive fire if it comes to that – which it inevitably will. Castiel hasn't complained about Baker being on the front-line once again; he's sure his superiors have their reasons.

Oh-three-oh-nine. Just a few minutes until they move out. Castiel shakes his sleeve back over his watch and starts slowly over towards where Baker is in loose formation. In their columns, the soldiers of Baker joke and complain and fiddle with the straps of their equipment. They're going in light, leaving all unnecessary baggage with regimental executive staff, and some of the men are still checking that they have everything that they need, and similarly, that they aren't carrying any unnecessary weight in their webbing or musette bags.

Castiel crosses to Lieutenant Virgil. “Go over them all one last time – nothing rattles, nothing shines, no unnecessary equipment. No helmets. Then get them ready to move immediately.”

Virgil gives a curt nod and goes to pass the message on to the other NCOs, and from then, Castiel gives them two minutes by his watch to finalise checking their baggage and camouflage before he radios in to battalion to confirm readiness, and sets the formation in motion.

Dirt and leaves crunch lightly underfoot as they go. The moon is hazy, swept over with wisps of dark cloud, and so they are for the most part invisible. Every few minutes, the cloud cover shifts and there is the dim glint of light on a rifle, or someone's face picked out in the dark where their camouflage grease is lacking. No helmets. Castiel's hair hangs lank and greasy over his forehead, past his ears. He pushes it

back from his face.

There is a tall figure alongside Castiel, someone with a slow, rolling gait, and Castiel recognises Dean – from the weight of his footsteps, from the way that he breathes – before he speaks.

“Where do you want me, sir?”

Castiel can't see Dean's face in the dark, but he's willing to put money on Dean having some kind of smug expression on. Castiel doesn't give him the satisfaction, and so doesn't react. “I want you going into the trenches with three-platoon,” he says. “Have du Mort stay back with four-platoon as support.”

“Yes, sir,” Dean says quietly. Then there is the light touch of a hand to the back of his hand.

Castiel starts, his head snapping over to look at Dean, and he stops walking. The company keeps going, patrolling right past him, and Dean is gone with the rest of them. After several yards, he melts in the shadows so that Castiel can't see him anymore. Castiel exhales sharply through his nose, and he starts up walking again. His skin is buzzing.

He moves through the company to find his platoon leaders, speaking quietly to them one by one. “When we reach our final RVP, fix bayonets upon my command and remove armbands,” he says. He then pushes through to the front where they tie onto Fox and he peers through the dark at the bunker in the distance. All he can see of it beyond the next hill are the dimly flickering lights of its sentry outposts – no need for light discipline when all of the Allied Forces know where you are and can't break in anyway.

They're going in by squads, each fire-team filtering in through the

dark to reach the trench system and beyond without being noticed. One-platoon are tasked with taking out the sentry outposts and cutting off their communications with the rest of the bunker. Two-platoon's squads will be the first into the trenches this side, with three-platoon close behind. Four-platoon are in reserve, to ensure that the enemy are cut off in their positions and unable to move away to an unassaulted section of trench to regroup. Castiel has been told that they won't need to lay down suppressive fire, but he's keeping four-platoon loaded and ready anyway.

A half-mile or so from the bunker, Castiel settles his men down in the shadows for their final rendezvous point. They pull off their white armbands, tuck them into pockets. Their bayonets catch the light as each man pulls his out of his webbing, throwing dim white grey light across the trees and across each other faces, and the sound of the catch clicking ripples across the line. Castiel pulls his out last, clicks it into place and twists.

There is time for one last check – ammunition, equipment, injuries, inhibitions – and then they move out towards the bunker again.

With the exception of Lieutenant Laufeyson and Fox Company, who was under orders to set his rendezvous point somewhere ahead of Baker, the other companies have long since disappeared, flanking the bunker to press in at its other sides. The bunker will be surrounded. 1st Battalion has been pulled back from Plouzané to assist, and so for the first time, the entirety of the 116th will be moving on this one position.

Castiel takes a deep breath. He holds his rifle down from his shoulder, bayonet pointed to the ground. They are within two hundred yards of the bunker; it's time to go.

“Move out, move out,” he urges in a whisper as he jogs up the length of the company towards second-platoon. “Move out - first squad takes the corner position to hold the right flank of the draw; all one-platoon

squads after push down towards the left. Go!”

The men disperse, and Castiel follows one-platoon's first squad as they run off towards the further of the two OPs. They split, half flanking wide around the front of the OP, and they catch the sentry's attention – a voice calls out in German, and there is movement – and then the second fire-team comes in hard from the side.

For several seconds, there is chaos that Castiel can't untangle from the back of the squad to see what's happening, but then Milligan is throwing a bayonet-bloodied body onto the floor and Private Tran is struggling with a heavier sentry man. By the time Castiel comes to help, both positions are down, both men dead.

“Check for comms and intel,” Castiel says, already stooping to turn one of the dead soldiers over to search through his pocket.

A crack rings out from the other OP, and Castiel looks over sharply to follow the sound. He can't see his other squad through the dark, but there is a faint noise, a rustle, and there are low voices, and Castiel feels dread rise in his gut at the idea that they may have already lost the element of surprise.

“Sergeant Milligan, take them around once this position is clear,” Castiel orders, and he heads off at a run for the other sentry outpost. He feels impossibly loud as he goes – his rifle clanking with every step, his webbing jostling, his boots thundering over the uneven turf. He holds his breath as he goes, as though that'll make a difference.

A silhouette in the dark twists fast as they hear Castiel coming, and the figure pulls his rifle up into his shoulder. “Thund--”

“Flash,” Castiel says, and he slows as he approaches, drops into a

crouch to stay out of sight. “Who's hit?”

“Morvey, sir – through the shoulder,” First Sergeant Masters says as he digs in the pockets of a fallen German infantryman. “No comms on this one – Private Yen, look through the prisoners' things for a radio.”

There's another German soldier sat still at the bottom of the foxhole, hands folded in his lap. There's a spray of blood across his chin and throat, and his breathing is laboured, but he yields to Yen's ministrations when the private climbs down with him.

Masters straightens up. “Sir, I don't know what we're gonna do with--”

“Don't worry about it.” Castiel knows what Masters' is worried about him. This is a great deal earlier to be dealing with prisoners that they expected. There is nowhere safe to keep him, and there is no way to be sure that he won't return to his unit unless supervised, which means reassigning men that Baker desperately needs for the assault. “Leave Private Yen. And I'll deal with Morvey, you keep moving up. Did you find any comms on the prisoner?”

“No, sir.”

“Then secure him, get him off the line, and await further instructions.” Castiel ducks to Private Morvey then, unzips his combat jacket and tugs one side down to see the bullet-wound. It's clean, and when Castiel tips him forwards, there's a neat exit wound punched through the meat of his shoulder, so it's as good as bullet-wounds go. He digs through Morvey's first-aid kit in his webbing, comes up with a small roll of cotton wool and some sulfa powder, and he gets to patching Morvey up as best he can.

“You're alright,” he says under his breath, while Masters and the rest

of the squad head off for the next OP. He applies pressure and uses a spare weapons-cleaning rag to tie the wool and gauze to his shoulder. “Try not to move around too much.”

Morvey nods. “I'm doing fine, sir, really. It stings like a motherfucker, but I'm fine.”

As Castiel works, there is gunfire behind him. It is a slow-starting thing in the trenches, a couple of shots squeezed off in quick succession, and then silence before the rounds come faintly chattering again. Gradually, it spreads. “So much for stealth,” Castiel mutters, and Morvey laughs. At least it wasn't for nothing – by this point, Baker are right up close to the bunker, and out of range of the enemy's artillery, which was a crucial part of their previous inability to break through. Maybe getting clear of the guns was all they ever needed.

“Alright. Done.” Castiel zips the front of Morvey's jacket back up. “Are you okay to get back to the tree-line on your own?”

Morvey tries for a strained smile. “Can do, sir. Don't worry about me.”

Castiel nods. He helps Morvey up onto his feet. “Don't make for the RVP, just wait out of sight with Yen. I'll send Winchester or du Mort to come find you when they can.”

Morvey grunts as he moves, but he waves a hand at Castiel to indicate he's okay, and Castiel doesn't wait to make sure that he gets to the tree-line alright. He's already been out of the fire-fight too long; he shifts his rifle sling over his neck and he runs for the trenches.

There is a flash of light ahead, a sharp noise like the shattering of glass, and then the S-mines detonate alongside the trench draw – one, then another. It's almost too dark for proven route, and as Castiel

weaves through to the rest of his men, he wonders if this, too, was part of General Middleton's plan: to get half his soldiers blown up or shredded by Bouncing Betty shrapnel.

Somehow, against all odds, he reaches the draw, and he slides more than he walks, one leg going out from underneath as he tumbles down embankment, and then he crashes into Private Rosen's back. He thinks to apologise as he clambers off, and then doesn't, and he moves quickly along the trench to find Sergeant Garrigan.

“How are we doing?” Castiel yells over the rising din. Each company is in position now, putting pressure on the bunker, and as the enemy tries to keep them out at all sides, the sound of gunfire and of short-range mortars firing in almost deafening.

“We got a problem, sir,” Garrigan responds, and he reaches out to point down the line. “Trench narrows up there, sir, and we can't get anyone through it. The Krauts have got perfect defilade back beyond it, and they're picking us off before we can find a way through--”

There is a short shout, and then Castiel watches a stick grenade come soaring down into two-platoon's end of the trench. “Grenade,” he yells, swiping his hand furiously over to indicate for everyone to get out of the way, but his words are being drowned out by the general roaring chaos of the firefight all around them. “Clear out, clear out--”

Panic sets in with a mad scramble to move, but there's not enough time and there's too many of them packed into too small a space, and the grenade goes off.

Smoke kicks up high with loose soil and a flash of fire, and Castiel recoils back against the trench wall. There is a ringing in his ears as he pushes himself off the wall, and he stumbles towards the site of impact. The men there are a tangle of limbs – someone has fallen on a

stray bayonet, and someone is torn up by shrapnel, and someone is choking as they react to the grenade frag with a swelling burn across half their face that oozes thick blood into their mouth – and then Inias is shouting for a medic.

“Garrigan,” Castiel shouts, and uses his shoulder to jerk him around. “Pull back everyone towards the draw, get out of range of grenadiers, and stop laying down fire on them – let them think we're retreating, then when they push forwards to regain this section of the trench, get them. Push back hard and fast, don't give them a chance to get back behind cover--”

“Yes, sir,” Garrigan says, and as Castiel can hear him calling out the order for the rest of his squad as Castiel heads back the other way to find the corner-stone position holding their flank.

He passes Inias - “watch the sides of the trenches for a squad coming around to flank our sides,” he tells him – and passes Hester coming in with three-platoon, splattered with blood from pushing in past the S-mines - “hold back here with two-platoon for orders from Wallace and Garrigan--” - and then settles against the wall behind Corporal Mills.

“How's it going?” he calls up.

“Sir, we've near cleared this section but more Krauts keep dropping in to fill it up, I figure we gotta push up and take it,” Mills says breathlessly. He has a bloodied lip.

“Negative – it's not our section. If we cross arcs of fire with F-Company, someone will get hurt,” Castiel says. “You keep it empty and keep an eye on it. If more drop in, push forwards for the assault and then pull back immediately – do not hold, is that clear?”

At that moment, several German soldiers come spilling around the corner at the end of their short section of trench, and Castiel drops to a knee, pulls his rifle up. He squeezes off two shots – shatters someone's shoulder, gets another through the throat – and he lets out his breath.

“Push up now!”

They go fast, jumping to clear bodies and abandoned equipment, and there are three more at the ends who bring up their weapons – one sub-machine-gun, two rifles – and Castiel throws himself against the wall, out of line of the first chatter of fire. He hears a harsh, bubbling cry behind him, but doesn't look back. He shoots once, and again, and on the other side of the trench, a few yards up ahead of Castiel, there is Mills firing off steadily.

They hold together, take out the sub-machine-gun first, and Mills gets tossed back to the wall by a round that grazes his arm, and then when Mills is up - “I'm fine, sir, I'm fine,” he insists through gritted teeth – they rush the last two.

The first soldier takes a round through the front of his helmet that snaps his head back hard and knocks him down. The second stumbles backwards, his rifle falling to the ground with a crash, and as he lies on his back in the dirt, he doesn't surrender, but gropes frantically behind him for a weapon – and Castiel snaps the safety off his rifle, points and squeezes the trigger, but his clip snaps off, flies hotly away from him, and there is Private Callahee at his back yelling, *gebt auf, gebt auf*, for surrender – and the German has his hand on a revolver, his fingers spinning the chamber, hammer clicked back, and Castiel goes by instinct. He thrusts his rifle forwards hard, shoves his bayonet under the soldier's chinstrap.

As the metal bites through his throat – windpipe, jugular – the kid looks up. He has green eyes. He has blood spilling out of his mouth, down his chin, and he jerks in place as he chokes, and all Castiel can

think is that he's probably the same age as Sam Winchester.

Castiel puts a boot on the kid's shoulder and uses his weight as leverage to yank his bayonet free, and then he twists back to the rest of the squad. “I want a grenadier up front – Turner! Now!” he yells, and he throws out an arm to pull the rest of the squad back against the wall out of the sight-lines of enemy further down the trench. As Jesse Turner comes running up to hurl a grenade down the trench, Castiel grabs a handful of Corporal Mills' jacket. “Hold this position – I'll be right back.”

However, he is distracted, because as Turner comes past, cocks his arm, and throws, there is another handful of enemy infantry coming around the corner. Without meaning to, Castiel finds himself watching. He barely breathes. There is Callahee, excitedly yelling, “Light 'em up,” and there are the Germans, and then there is an explosion that kicks up soil and smoke higher than the trench walls, and the air is torn up with screaming.

The smoke is thick, black, and twists upwards over a lightening sky. The sun is coming up.

Item Company of 1st Battalion break through first, and then over the next few hours, the 116th clear the position. They take prisoners, they tend to injuries, they capture radios and German intelligence, and by noon, La Trinité is taken.

Castiel takes slow steps to the edge of the trench system, and he sinks to sit on the edge – one knee pulled up in front of him, the other loosely dangling down. His boot scuffs against a chunk of shrapnel embedded in the trench wall.

From this angle, looking out, Castiel can see everything. He can see where the earth has recently been turned over to conceal S-mines; he

can see cover in the distant tree-line where they would have been hidden from the bunker and its artillery. There are craters in the ground where the Graf Spee guns' fire-power devastated the clearing, and around each crater is a five-foot scattering of loose dirt and metal and scraps of bloodied uniform. Castiel rubs a hand over the back of his head.

As much as he wants to just take a moment to calm down and appreciate this victory, he can't turn off his brain. He's already formulating orders. Disarm and process German prisoners. Have minesweepers note the location of each mine – but do not disarm – and have them determine a safe route in and out of the bunker. Clear the trenches of enemy weapons and intelligence. Ensure that German communications are cut. Send a runner back to battalion for the rest of their equipment. Fortify the bunker against a counter-attack by distant enemy guns. There is still more that only he can do – discuss upcoming movements with the other company commanding officers; report back to battalion on action; write up medical report, supplies report, ammunition usage.

Castiel takes long, slow breaths. He curls his hand around his ankle where he's propped his leg up on the embankment, and he stretches his fingers until the joints pop. He cracks his knuckles.

He does his best not to let himself think about the casualties incurred in taking this bunker – from today, and from all the days before where they couldn't quite break through – but it's always there in the back of his mind. The hole in Sergeant Lafitte's jaw; the ragged end of his leg. Richardson, with a hole in his head. Gideon, gasping through blood and smoke. Gallagher's loose jaw.

Castiel squeezes his eyes close. He stretches his hand out. Rubs at the knuckles with his thumb, picks at the skin.

There are heavy footsteps coming along the embankment behind Castiel, someone muttering to themselves as they try not to fall into

the trench, and then Dean is at Castiel's side, and he says, “Shit.”

Castiel doesn't look up at him.

“We've done it. I can't believe it. We've actually, finally done it. Fuck.”

Dean Winchester, ever the optimist. Castiel doesn't have the energy for it. As he stares bleakly out at the clearing ahead, he lets out a slow breath. “We've barely started.”

Dean takes a couple more steps over and slowly eases himself down to sit beside Castiel, legs down into the trench. He looks over at him. “What's that?”

“We've barely started,” Castiel repeats. “There's going to be a counter-attack. They've lost Le Conquet, Graf Spee is a lost cause – Plouzané is the last stronghold between us and Brest, and they're holding onto it by their teeth. If we get past Plouzané, there's only a handful more forts before we're past the Penfeld and clearing Brest's western flank.” He exhales slowly. “They are not going to want to let this go.”

“We'll manage. We always do.”

Castiel almost laughs at that. *We'll manage.* He doesn't want to manage. He wants to win. He wants everybody in his company to get to go back safe to their families. He wants to go home.

Dean reaches over, butts the back of his hand against Castiel's arm. “Hey. I'm serious. We're gonna be fine.”

“I have no doubt we'll pull through eventually,” Castiel says tonelessly. “I just – don't want to write anymore letters of condolence.” He looks down at his hands. There is dirt caked onto his thumbnail, which he picks at. “Do you have a smoke?”

“Uhh.” Dean digs in the pockets of his combat jacket and comes out with a small tin. He flips it open and grimaces. “Crap. I've only got one. Sorry.”

Castiel gives a loose shrug. He turns out to look across the clearing again.

By his side, Dean flicks his lighter up, sucks on the end of his cigarette until it catches and smoulders. He breathes too deep – splutters as he exhales – and then he holds it out.

Castiel looks at his extended hand, the cigarette smoking dimly between his fingers. He hadn't expected Dean to share. However, he's too badly in need of it to argue, and so he takes it from Dean. He takes a long pull, filling his lungs, and he closes his eyes as he breathes it out.

“They'll counter-attack,” he says, his voice hoarse with smoke, “and we'll resist. And then we'll move up through Plouzané, and then towards the Penfeld river, and into Brest. And then we'll move up north to capture another position, and then another town, and some other bunker with guns big enough to punch a hole in a concrete slab--” he pauses here, takes a long drag on Dean's cigarette; he exhales smoke as he goes on, “--and we'll keep doing that until we're dead.”

“Jesus.” Dean takes the cigarette away from him. “You're real cheerful company.”

“Nobody asked you to sit here,” Castiel says irritably, and he knows that he's being an ungrateful asshole, but he's not in the mood to care.

“Yeah, yeah. It's a free country.”

Castiel looks over. “No, it isn't. It's occupied by fascists who want to kill us.”

Unexpectedly, Dean bursts out laughing, and he rocks back in his seat to lean on one hand, cigarette hanging loose in his mouth. “You're something else, you know that?”

Castiel squints at him.

“What?”

Castiel doesn't know what to say. He isn't sure what Dean means, but he doesn't want to push at it too much, because there's warmth in Dean's voice and his eyes crinkle when he smiles, and he doesn't want to ruin it. Instead he grouches, “Give me that,” and snatches the cigarette out of Dean's hand.

He sets it to his mouth, breathes deep, and for several moments they don't speak. Castiel smokes, and he looks out across the clearing and the scattered rubble and dirt of their previous assaults, and Dean breathes steadily beside him.

Then, out of the blue, Dean announces, “You know – I can't picture you as a kid.”

Castiel takes a moment to think this through. “You're right,” he says. “I was born like this. Twenty-eight years old, six foot tall, and no fun.”

Dean laughs – more than is warranted from Castiel's comment. He curls over into himself, and he presses the heel of his hand up underneath his nose to muffle a decidedly snort-like sound.

Castiel narrows his eyes at him. “What's so funny?”

Dean wipes at the corner of his eyes. “You, thinking you're six foot tall.”

“I am six foot tall.”

“Okay.”

“I am,” Castiel says, irritated now. “I had to be measured by the US Army to be declared 1A.”

Dean laughs again. “Okay.”

“I *am.*”

“Anyway,” Dean says.

Castiel recognises the deliberate change of topic, and it annoys him

that Dean isn't willing to concede this battle, but he doesn't care for now. He knows that he's six foot tall, and he doesn't need to Dean to believe him. He knows it for a fact, even if Dean is giant and gangly and makes him feel small.

Dean goes on, “You didn't answer my question.”

“You didn't ask me a question.” Castiel looks over at him. “You gave me a statement. *I can't picture you as a kid* – that's a statement, and--”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Okay, okay, smart-ass. So what were you like?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because I'm not convinced you're not a robot.” Dean pulls a face. “Or a Soviet spy – not decided yet.” In the lull, Castiel sucks on the cigarette, holds the smoke in as long as he can, and he thinks. As he exhales, Dean reaches over to pluck the cigarette from Castiel's hand. “So?” Dean says.

“I spent my formative years in the Motherland,” Castiel starts, matter-of-fact, and Dean bursts out laughing again.

“You fucking asshole,” Dean exclaims, and for a moment, Castiel entertains the idea of reverting to his law-abiding officer persona and telling Dean off for addressing him in that way. It only lasts a moment. He's too exhausted to be that person now. For now, he is content not to be anyone.

Castiel thinks about it. “I liked math,” he starts slowly. “And science. When I was younger, I thought I wanted to be an inventor – only I

never had any interesting ideas, which was an anti-climatic end to that."

"That's cute," Dean says. He breathes out smoke, pinches his lips close together to try and blow smoke rings. He fails.

"I was on the cross-country running team." Castiel presses his lips into a thin line and tries to think of what else to say, but when he thinks of his adolescence, he only really thinks of one thing. "I got into a lot of fights."

Dean looks over, eyebrows raised.

"Lieutenant Wallace and I both did," Castiel clarifies. "It wasn't only me."

"You're kidding," Dean says. "Seriously? What, did you get picked on or something?"

Castiel almost laughs at that. "Not exactly." He looks down, twists his hands together. "I just – had a bad temper."

Dean stares at him for several long moments, and finally concludes: "Bullshit." He's shaking his head, and he points a finger at Castiel. "I call bullshit. I mean, if you said that as a kid you were a grumpy asshole with not a lot of patience--"

Castiel glares at him.

“--now that, I could believe. But angry? Like, hitting people? No way. You're probably one of the most annoyingly calm, unflappable people I've ever met.”

Castiel tries to decide whether or not that's a compliment. He isn't sure either way. After a beat, he says quietly, “Well, it's cultivated.”

“You're serious.”

“Naturally short fuse, useless father, not many friends. More money than sense, half the time.” Castiel tilts his head over. “Being a repressed homosexual probably didn't help.” He glances quickly over his shoulder, but there's no-one in earshot. “And, to some extent, Lieutenant Wallace likely encouraged me.”

On his other side, Dean just laughs. “Shit. So what I'm getting from this is that you picked a lot of fights you couldn't finish, and good old Lieutenant Wallace had to fish you out afterwards.”

“Something like that,” Castiel says. He takes Dean's cigarette out of his mouth – too lazy for etiquette, too tired to care about the accidental way his middle finger grazes over Dean's bottom lip – and sucks at it. “So what about you?”

“Oh, you know, mostly I just took care of Sammy. Otherwise, it was all the usual.” Dean shrugs. “Baseball. Taking nice girls to the movies. Fixing cars, at least 'til I figured out that people were more interesting.”

Through a mouthful of blue smoke spilling out over his lips, Castiel says, “How very all-American of you.”

Dean scoffs, throws Castiel a look as though he's thinking about telling him to fuck off, but doesn't. “Hey. Most of it wasn't my idea, okay? The sports, the part-time mechanic stuff, that's the kind of shit my dad did when he was a kid, so.” He doesn't elaborate, but he doesn't need to.

Castiel studies him. “You're not close,” he ventures.

“What?”

“You and your father.”

Dean's head snaps up to stare incredulously at Castiel. “Huh? No way. We're close, we're really close.”

Castiel squints at him, uncomprehending.

“Like, we have our issues, but me and him are great,” Dean goes on to explain, and a small smile starts up on his lips. “I mean, it helps that we're really similar. You know, it's actually kinda crazy, thinking about it. We like the same music, the same food... Obviously, he taught me everything I know about some stuff, like cars, and girls, so maybe it doesn't count but – right?” Dean grins, even though Castiel hasn't said anything. He's lit up like a headlamp. “Right - it's weird! My dad and Sam, they don't have too much in common – which, I figure, is why they fight so much. But sometimes, I swear to God, with my dad, sometimes I feel like. Like, I don't know, like we're the same person. You know? It's--”

“Crazy,” Castiel echoes. “Yeah.” He wants to ask how things are with Dean's father, if the unrest at home has settled and if Sam is alright, but he doesn't know how to find the words. He holds out a hand for the cigarette.

Dean passes it over, but then a long shadow is cast over Castiel, and with the cigarette only just to his lips, he looks up to find Ash Lowell standing over him. Castiel lowers the cigarette. “Everything alright, corporal?”

“Fine, sir, only Lieutenant Wallace's looking for you. Said I knew where you were, so I said I'd come get you.”

Castiel sighs. “Tell him I'm on my way.”

Dean reaches for the cigarette, takes it from his hand, and sticks it in his mouth. As Castiel hauls himself onto his feet, he thinks that he could do with another one.

He doesn't bother to say goodbye to Dean; he climbs up the embankment after Corporal Lowell and follows along the line of the trench to find Inias.

Beyond the bunker and beyond the trench-system, Castiel finds him. Amassed in a cluster of old trees are a handful of Baker's officers, non-commissioned and otherwise, mostly with arms folded and in quiet discussion. They look up as Castiel comes over.

“Sorry, I was just having a smoke,” he says.

“Good of you to finally join us,” Lieutenant Alistair says drily, which Castiel ignores.

“We have sixteen prisoners on our side – five of them wounded – and

we have six of our casualties," First Sergeant Masters starts up. "We got word from Lieutenant Cain that POWs are being held at a CP being set up inside the bunker's basement, so--"

"Cain?" Castiel interrupts.

"New CO of Dog Company."

Castiel frowns. "And – Major Isaacs?" he asks, although he already knows the answer.

"Hit during the assault."

Castiel nods. "Alright. The basement sounds good. We'll move our POWs down there immediately, then – Virgil, you take control of that, and ensure that any wounded prisoners are escorted to an aid station as soon as we have battalion contact." Castiel looks at Masters. "How many of our casualties are mobile?"

"Two – maybe three, if we can get Denton some morphine – but we have several in a critical condition that can't be moved except immediately into an aid station for surgery, at the least."

Castiel considers this. "Send a runner to the other companies, see if they have any surgeons we can borrow until we get in touch with battalion – and send another out to 1st Battalion to see if they're having any better luck with their radios, and if we can assign our wounded to their aid station in mean-time." He looks around at the rest of them, takes a deep breath, and begins to reel off his list of orders – mine-sweep, weapon and intelligence sweep, bunker fortifications, ammunition check. Let them think he's not involved if they like, but it isn't true.

“Any further questions?” Castiel asks, once he's finished his ranting list of commands, and he looks over the group before him.

“No, sir,” Sergeant Milligan says, echoed by the others. Inias doesn't say anything.

Virgil lifts a hand. “Where are we going to station the men for the next few hours?”

“Take them out past the original German OPs this side of the line,” Castiel says, and points. “Set up a linear harbour area, with two squads on watch at all times, and we'll have a rota with the other companies to have platoons covering the bunker. One-platoon will be on first – send them up to the bunker and I'll get them coordinated with the other platoons on guard. We'll hold until we get further orders from battalion or any indication as to movement. Remember, I want everyone battle-ready. We don't want a counter-attack to take us by surprise.”

“Will do,” Virgil says.

The men move away in scattered clumps – Hester and Virgil going off towards the bunker together, Masters and Milligan playfully bickering as they go down towards the company – and there is Inias, standing still and staring at Castiel for several more moments.

Castiel looks at him. “What?”

Inias raises his eyebrows. “I didn't say anything.”

“You didn't have to. You're just staring at me like--”

“Like what?”

“I don't fucking know – what do you want?” Castiel demands.

“Nothing,” Inias says flatly. “I don't want anything from you – just maybe, in future, you could do me a favour and wait until our position is at least secure.”

Castiel's mouth falls open. “Inias – I was having a smoke.”

Inias drops his head back, exhales loudly. “Okay,” he says. “Okay.”

“Inias--”

“Forget about it, alright? Forget I said anything,” Inias says, with the shortness of his tone indicating the exact opposite, and he turns around to head away down the till. Before he can leave, Castiel lunges out and grabs Inias' elbow, holds him still.

“Inias,” Castiel says. “Is there a problem here?”

Inias pulls his arm away. “No. No, we don't have a problem.”

“Well, it feels like there is, so whatever is going on--”

“I don't want to do this right now,” Inias says, and he glances away over his shoulder. Castiel's heart sinks – so there is something wrong after all. “I've got shit to do. Hell, you've got shit to do. Okay? Just – forget about it.”

Inias offers Castiel something close to a smile, to reassure him, but it's strained and unfamiliar. Then he turns and heads away down the hill to find his platoon, and Castiel watches him go. He doesn't know why Inias has to make everything so much more difficult than it already is – as though Castiel isn't already aware that he's a shitty commanding officer. He doesn't need his best friend making him feel like a failure on top of everything else.

Castiel pulls off his helmet and scratches a hand through his greasy hair. He looks down the hill, watching the way the land tilts away from the bunker, rolls from the shrapnel-scattered clearing down into the jagged line of the trees, fields square and yellow with rapeseed and overgrown sunflowers beyond - and he thinks that the Germans had a hell of a view.

The counter-attack is brutal.

At around eighteen-hundred hours, Castiel is writing up yesterday's action reports from the assault when he is startled from his reverie by the low, building whistle of artillery. He stuffs his papers into the pocket of his combat jacket, palms his helmet onto his head as he scrambles onto his feet, and he takes off running the length of the company.

They got into contact with battalion staff a few hours earlier, with time enough to get the more critically wounded off the front-line, and to get their orders, but not enough time to get supplies brought forwards, unfortunately.

1st Battalion are being pushed forwards, through Plouzané, towards Fort Montbarey, and so 2nd Battalion are holding the bunker until division can organise someone else to relieve them. Five of six companies are designated a section of trench, with a rota allowing for one company at a time to retreat from the front-line and man the bunkers' communications. At present, it isn't Baker's time. They're at the front, as usual, and shells are roaring from the sky.

“Everyone into cover – get ready!” he yells as he goes. The sky is darkening overhead as night comes crawling closer, and Castiel's men have been on the line for over twelve hours straight. He ducks low as he goes, slaps a hand to the backs of some of the younger soldiers as they get ready – snap their LSW support tripods into place, rearrange their bandoliers, lock and load. “Get ready--”

The first shell hits just short of the trenches, sprays dirt and metal down into their line, and Castiel drops his head, presses close into the wall. The second is closer still. The third punches a hole through the eastern flank of their section, decimating a machine-gunner unit. Castiel looks over, but he can't remember who was manning the gun. Three people are dead and he can't think what their names were before they were nothing.

German reinforcements come in wave after wave, and they're good – they know the weak points of the bunker's perimeter, and they know where to go to avoid triggering S-mines. They fight long into the night, and they fight lit by tracer flares and the hot flashes of artillery fire. There are long lines of German soldiers pressing hard across the clearing, running fast, and it's all Castiel to do to keep his men well-enough supplied to keep them back.

“We're real low on ammo here,” Private Maier is yelling frantically as their gun chatters out rounds hard and fast, splinters the oncoming enemy force, and then Corporal Harvelle is slapping him on the back and comes along the trench at a run.

“Request for additional bandoliers, sir,” Harvelle yells, one hand flat over his helmet as a shell crashes nearby and blacks out the sky with soot and fire.

“Affirmative – get back to your platoon!” Castiel twists the other way. “Miller, Lance Corporal Stepp – get back to the bunker, along Able's line. Get some more bandoliers up here and pass them down along one- and two-platoon. Now!”

Castiel twists to glance along the line to see how the other gunners nearby are doing, but in the dark, it's hard to tell. Everything is shouting and gunfire, and the Germans ahead are cast in flickering light so that they move like shadow-puppets, jerking ever closer, and there is a dark spray behind them as they catch the bullets.

Castiel pulls his rifle up, peers through the sights. There is a German man, tall, thinly-built, with his hand in the air. Castiel aims for the heart.

Behind them is the low thud, the slugging sound of heavy artillery firing – so at least they didn't disarm all the Germans' guns when they took La Trinité for their own – and then the earth is quaking beneath Castiel's feet as the shells crash to earth.

“Keep going, keep firing!” Castiel yells, running along the line. As he goes, he sees Private Zeddmore squeeze off two shots from his rifle, flinch back as his clip snaps off, and then stand to replace his clip. Castiel reaches out for him, yells, “Stay down--”

Amongst the chaos, Castiel doesn't hear any particular gunshot that strikes him more than the others, but Zeddmore lets out this grunt of surprise, and then he is reeling back a step, and he falls.

“Zeddmore,” Castiel gasps, and then - “Medic! I need a medic, left-flank of one-platoon!”

Below him, Zeddmore coughs and splutters, and his chest heaves. When Castiel drops to his knees to see the damage, there is a hole in his collarbone that spreads blood down his chest in a slow blossom, and all Castiel can do is brace both hands against the twitching wound and try to stem the blood flow.

“Everyone stay low,” Castiel shouts, twisting his head over his shoulder to be heard over the roar of incoming mortars. “You stand upright, you get hit – so stay down! And someone get me a medic!”

“Fuck,” Zeddmore groans. “Fuck – fuck, I'm sorry, sir.” Blood spills up out of his mouth, and he coughs it out. His breathing is unsteady.

“You're alright, private, you're going to be fine,” Castiel says. He turns back. “Medic, now!”

Then Ted du Mort is running the length of the trench, skidding on the mud, and he drops into a crouch beside Zeddmore. “Thanks, lieutenant, I've got this,” he says. “Sadowski, drop your weapon and help me get him out of here!”

Private Sadowski and du Mort each grab a handful of Zeddmore's webbing and haul him away down the line, and just as they move off, Sadowski is thrown back by a scattering of machine-gun rounds. Castiel opens his mouth to speak, but the bullet is through the corner of Sadowksi's left eye, leaving a blackened crater just smaller than a fist, and Castiel knows it's no use.

Just before twenty-one-thirty hours, a squad of enemy soldiers breaks through and comes down the draw on the left flank, and there are

several minutes of absolute chaos as one-platoon turns to push them back. The Germans reach a point where they have perfect enfilade and can fire straight down into the mass of Baker Company, and it is only the result of Corporal Mills hurling a perfectly-timed grenade into the centre of the draw that keeps Baker's flank from being over-run. Sergeant Milligan is injured in the blast, and Private Nicholls killed, but the assaulting squad is defeated.

Castiel turns out to face the front-line, and as he watches the next wave of German reinforcements come in with mortar teams and light artillery at their backs, Castiel entertains for the first time the thought that they could lose the bunker. It sinks slowly through him like cold water through heavy clothes, and he forces himself to breathe. They aren't going to lose the bunker. They've taken La Trinité, with sweat and with bloodshed, and they will not lose it now.

At the other end of the line, there is an upwards explosion of smoke that cuts out what little light they are afforded by the clear night sky and the silver of the moon, and then there is a hollow scream that twists through Castiel's gut. He feels as though he can hear the cry for a medic from every position along the line. He feels as though he has laid his men out in a neat little line for the taking.

Castiel pushes himself up onto his feet and moves down the trench. He doesn't have to time to think about whether they're going to make it. He shouts as he goes – *keep firing, keep going, hold the line, you're doing great, hold, hold* – and he tries to encourage the men, but he feels as though no-one is listening. They just huddle down against the dirt and they fire and fire, and they flinch away from shells coming in. Every few feet there is a clip flying from a rifle, hot and sharp, and the machine-gunners rattle through bandoliers faster than Castiel can supply them. He trips over something, glances back, and finds an outstretched arm. There is no shoulder attached. Castiel keeps going.

It's nearing one in the morning, with Baker strung out and exhausted, at two-thirds strength due to sustaining heavy losses from the shelling, and Castiel is tucked against the embankment beside Inias for a moment – to tell him to switch rates of fire within his platoon in order

to save ammunition – when Inias lowers his rifle. “Holy shit,” he says.

Castiel lifts his head from his iron-sight and looks out across the clearing, and he sees what Inias sees: the Germans, scattering.

One squad is pulling back at a run, retreating to the treeline; another is frozen stock-still, waiting for orders. Castiel lets out a breath that he didn't know he was holding. “They're retreating.”

“Hallelujah,” Inias says, and he looks over at Castiel with a wide, genuine grin that Castiel feels he hasn't seen for a long time. It's infectious. Castiel starts smiling too, just a little, and he feels lighter already.

Inias slaps a hand to his shoulder. “Good work, if I say so myself, babe, but we gotta keep on them until it's for sure.”

Castiel turns to yell down the line – *keep the pressure up, suppressive fire, keep going* – and then someone comes running along the trench.

They grab a handful of Castiel's combat and jerk at his clothes for attention. “Sir, Lieutenant Novak, sir--”

Castiel looks up to see Kevin Tran, with blood soaking his hands and splattered across one side of his face. “Tran, where are you hit?”

Tran shakes his head. “Not me, sir – Sergeant Winchester needs you on the right flank, sir, there's a lot of guys hit--”

Castiel nods. “Lead the way.” He twists back, raps a hand on the top of Inias' helmet. “I'll be right back – hold the line!”

Inias' eyes widen incredulously. “Where the hell are you going?” he yells. “They're almost retreating – if we slack off now, they'll fucking come back!”

“Then hold the line!”

Inias grabs hold of his arm. “We need you here!”

Castiel yanks away. “I said, I'll be right back!” he snaps. He scrambles over a ditch in the bottom of the trench, sidesteps the body of a fallen replacement – the name eludes him, but the kid is blonde and he has a sliver of shrapnel through his throat – and he follows Tran at a run.

Around the far corner, Dean and Teddy du Mort have set up a small medical station which is over-run by wounded soldiers, and as Castiel comes along, both of them are currently working over Sergeant Brady, lit by the red glow of their headlamps.

“Winchester?” Castiel starts, but he falters at the sight of Brady. He has his combat jacket ripped open, his T-shirt rucked up around his ribs, and Dean and du Mort are both frantically dealing with a hole in his stomach the size of a quarter which spurts hot, dark blood faster than they can wipe it away.

“Plasma,” Dean says, without looking up. His sleeves are pushed up, blood staining the skin all the way up his forearms. “We need plasma and morphine or we're gonna lose him – I sent Masters around to check with the men if anyone has anything in their aid-kits we can use, but we've been bleeding them dry for days – you need to get me some plasma.”

Castiel's stomach is curled tight as he watches blood pour out of Brady's stomach. “Where the hell am I gonna get plasma from?”

Dean doesn't answer.

Castiel nods to himself, and he turns to head back down the trench. “Private Bass, on me,” he shouts as he goes; Bass snaps the safety catch onto his rifle and sits upright. “I need you to run down to the other companies, see if you can find a surgeon or a medic with a plasma and morphine, and get back here ASAP. Winchester and du Mort are down our right flank, when you find some. Clear?”

“Yes, sir!”

As Bass tears off down the trench, Castiel runs back down the trench to keep everyone going – yelling at his NCOs, *keep up the pressure, don't let up, keep firing* – and a heavy shell comes screaming overhead as he goes – yelling, *heads down, take cover,* because the Germans are covering their retreat now and he doesn't want his men killed for no fucking reason. The shell hits, and it vibrates up through his feet, knocks him off-balance. He crashes into the wall of the trench in the dark, nearly knocking aside Donald Hanscum's machine-gun tripod.

“You alright sir?” Hanscum asks.

“Fine, thank you,” Castiel replies as he gets back up, and he grimaces. He continues on his way, past one-platoon’s section of the trench, and then Virgil catches his arm.

“Castiel, they're out of our sights, and we're wasting ammo laying down a base of fire when we can't even see them,” Virgil says.

“Keep it up a few minutes longer – switch to deliberate fire, slow the ammunition usage, but keep going until I order a cease-fire,” Castiel tells him. “I don't want them coming back because they think we're tired or out of ammo.”

Virgil nods, passes it down the line until *switch fire, switch fire* is ringing the length of the company, and Castiel grabs hold of a one-platoon radioman to call battalion.

“How's the rest of the perimeter holding?” Castiel asks. “We've got a retreat on our end and we're maintaining a base of fire to hold off a potential second-wave but--”

The radioman relays it into his mouth-piece, rambling a mile a minute, and when Castiel is satisfied that his message has been successfully relayed to battalion, he moves back down the line. He goes along to check that everyone has heard the order to switch to deliberate fire, but as he reaches the far end of four-platoon and turns to come back, he is faced with confusion in the company.

“Sir, are we going deliberate or ceasing fire--?”

““Are we calling for a cease-fire, sir?”

“Lieutenant Virgil is calling down the line for a cease-fire, sir – is that the right order--?”

Castiel pulls himself away from the tangle of men pressing in around with questions and demands, and he tries to get through the line with confusion bearing down on him from all sides. “Virgil?” he calls. “What's--?”

“Sir, they're saying the cease-fire is from battalion, should we--?”

“Excuse me, Lieutenant Novak, but I was just wanting to speak to you about my Thompson – see, the strap has gone and I tried to fix it but it's real unsteady when--”

“Excuse me,” Castiel says, and then louder: “Excuse me – can you give me a moment? I'll send Masters back to answer your questions, but get out of the way. Please, move.” He pushes through but is intercepted halfway down the line by Inias in two-platoon.

“I don't know why you went back up towards four-, instead of just waiting for the S-3 finish what he was going to say,” Inias mutters as he snaps the clip off his rifle to check the rounds inside.

Castiel exhales roughly, pausing in his way down the trench. “My apologies,” he says, his tone sharp. “I should have checked with you first, as I should with everything, because I am incapable of making my own decisions.”

“That's not what I said – Jesus, Cas, don't twist things.”

“What do you want from me?” Castiel demands. “I'm busy. You don't want me talking to Winchester because then I'm not doing my job, but then you don't seem to want me doing my job either, so what do you fucking want?”

Inias' jaw tightens. “Cas, I was only saying--”

Castiel doesn't stick around to hear what Inias has to say. He hurries along the last section of trench to where Virgil and Corporal Sorento are gathered around a radio mouth-piece.

“Battalion on the line, sir,” Sorento says. “They're calling for a cease-fire on our side of the bunker – do you want to speak to the S-3?”

“Yes – Virgil, pass the cease-fire along. One- and three-platoon keep watching the line, I want two- and three-platoon pulled back for a break. They get fifteen minutes to take on food, water - if they've got injuries, they get them looked at, if they've got bad equipment, they report it – and then I want them loaded and ready back on watch to switch over,” Castiel says.

“Yes, sir.”

“--come in, this is Baker Green, hold for the six--” Sorento holds out the radio mouth-piece.

Castiel takes it.

Within the next hour, Baker are able to settle down – still on the defensive, but not so rigidly alert – and it begins to sink in that maybe they've done it. Maybe the 116th has won La Trinité, and kept it.

The trench is something of a health hazard now, at approaching three in the morning, with the night impossibly dark all around them, and men sprawled out everywhere. Some of are taking the opportunity to get a few minutes' sleep; others are sat cross-legged in the dirt eating cold rations and relaxing with their friends. There are also the faint metallic sounds of some cleaning their weapons, and it relieves and saddens Castiel in equal measure to know that even now, in their moment of calm, they are half-ready to start killing again.

Castiel walks the line and he listens to it all. Harvelle assuring Private Hanscum that their rash is probably normal, but that they can talk to a medic about it if they want to. Ash Lowell and Mark Masters telling each other the most obscene jokes they can think of. Just past one-platoon, there is a conversation between Cole Trenton, Kevin Tran, and Corporal Mills that interests Castiel greatly.

“Apparently Fox and Golf got it hardest, around the other side,” Tran is telling them. “Apparently they nearly got through that side – nearly lost the whole position, except for some guy took out fifteen Krauts in a single sweep, got everybody else in his platoon moving.”

Trenton scoffs. “You're kidding me.”

“For real. Some technical sergeant – something Carr, I think. Maybe Wilson, or Wilmer, I don't know. I only heard from Tobias over in Charlie, 'cause he says the guy's getting recommended a Distinguished Service Cross.”

“Fuck,” Trenton says. “I could've done that, got a nice shiny medal for my ma.”

“Yeah, you could've – but you didn't,” Corporal Mills points out.

“So I'm guessing we're getting Carr drinks then, when we get back to England?” Tran says begrudgingly.

Trenton barks a laugh. “Sure thing, Kevin, if you figure we're ever getting back to England except in a goddamn body-bag.”

Castiel turns his head away. He shouldn't be eavesdropping, but the information about Golf Company is interesting. He knew it was a close call with the bunker, but he didn't know the extent to which they were almost overrun.

He climbs the embankment and moves along the line to find the other company commanding officers. The 116th have catered to their wounded, and word from Battalion is that supply officers will be coming around soon, but otherwise, Castiel has no idea what the plan is. He knows that whatever is happening, he is going to have a lot of work to do.

He finds Gabriel inside the bunker, eating stale K-rations, who is similarly uninformed, and meets the new CO of Dog Company for the first time – tall, and shaggy hair, with a beard longer than Castiel thinks is probably military regulation, Lieutenant Cain is equally intimidating and impressive, although the word from Gabriel is that he's a West Point graduate making quick leaps up the chain of command. He probably won't be here long.

Castiel receives yesterday's complete medical report from du Mort, with the assurance that today's casualties will be reported on and handed over ASAP; he sends two squads out to search the bodies of the fallen Germans in the clearing for intelligence; he studies maps and sand-tables and diagrams of Allied movements until his head aches. He organises sentry rotas and platoon-led reconnaissance patrols out from their section of perimeter, and he spends too long on the radio to Major Singer relaying the general condition of the company, as well as how many replacements they may need to fill in for old fatalities.

It's shaping to be a long day, after an even longer night, and Castiel is exhausted even as his watch approaches oh-five-hundred-hours. He is just heading down to find Lieutenant Virgil and tell him to take 2IC for a few minutes so that Castiel can eat something – and he idly considers whether this would be breakfast, or yesterday's dinner, or perhaps even the lunch he never had – when he catches sight of someone walking up the hill towards him, who by the tread of his

steps and the shape of his silhouette, he can identify as being Inias.

Inias, looking up, must have a similar thought process, realising who is coming down towards him, and veers slightly in his path so it brings him closer to Castiel.

“Hello, Inias,” Castiel says stiffly as he walks towards him, still irritated by their completely unnecessary argument in the trench. “Everything alright?”

“Hey, Cas.” Inias slows but doesn't stop, ready to continue past Castiel. “If you've got a minute, I just saw Major Campbell somewhere , trying to get in touch with the company COs to organise a briefing later tonight about when we're being relieved – so if you think you can find any time in your hectic schedule--”

“Okay, I can't do this,” Castiel says, annoyance flaring up inside him all over again, and he wheels around to follow Inias, grabs a handful of his jacket, and holds him still.

Inias turns, slowly, and then straightens. He lifts his chin. He's seen Castiel angry, knows the tell-tale signs before he snaps, and Castiel can tell that Inias is calculating. Castiel wonders what he figures. Castiel wonders who Inias thinks will win, if it comes to that. “Can't do what?”

“This whole thing. Me doing things are clearly, to you, so morally condemnable – you silently judging me from afar, and never, ever actually saying anything because you won't talk to me like a normal human being--”

Inias scoffs. “That's pretty rich coming from the guy who hasn't been honest about his feelings since he was eleven.”

Castiel sets his jaw. He knows goading when he sees it – he's done enough of it himself – and he wants to be bigger than that. He wishes he was, but he can feel it getting under his skin. He can feel his anger simmering. Castiel takes a deep breath. “Nice try, Inias. I'm not doing this. Just fucking tell me what's wrong, and--”

“Look, I don't want to talk about it,” Inias says, and he turns away from Castiel, and it's that dismissive gesture that sparks fresh irritation through Castiel's blood.

“Clearly you do,” Castiel says, and he can hear the way his own voice is loud and bratty. He hasn't fought with Inias like this since high school, and now he remembers it all: Inias' need to be friends with everyone, his hatred of conflict. When they were seventeen, it took Castiel swinging for his head to get Inias to open up. “What is it?”

“No, I really don't want to talk about it, because if we talk about it, I'll get mad, and we'll fight, and I don't want to fight with you--”

Castiel does a double-take. “Why do we have to fight?”

“Because you're infuriating at the moment, and I'm sick of--” Inias cuts himself off sharply, takes a deep breath. “I'm not doing this. I told you, I don't want to do this right now.”

“It's Winchester, isn't it?” Castiel says flatly.

“It's not Winchester,” Inias says.

“Really? Because it's almost surreal, the correlation between my conversations with Winchester and you suddenly turning into this raging asshole--”

“It's not Winchester, Cas, it's you,” Inias snaps. “Jesus fucking Christ, you can't leave well enough alone, can you?”

Castiel pulls back. “What?”

“I'm sorry, I'm just sick of this whole Winchester thing,” Inias says, and he keeps his voice low so that they aren't overhead, but by the sharp venom of his tone, he may as well be screaming. “I'm sick of the person he turned you into, I'm sick of – god, I don't fucking know, Cas, I'm sick of the way you can't concentrate on tying your own goddamn shoelaces if he's within fifty feet. Yeah, he's always been a pain in the ass, but he was never a distraction – he was never a goddamn problem – until you let him be. He snaps his fingers, he so much as breathes in your direction, and you're falling over yourself to give him whatever he fucking wants.”

“I don't--” Castiel starts, but he can't finish.

Inias cuts over him. “You spend practically your every waking moment talking to him, or you have these stupid arguments and then you're a fucking asshole for ten days until you get it out of your system or you go back to him, I don't know,” he says, and he's just listing failures, his words a furious ramble without shape or reason, “you disappear when we need you most, you wander off whenever the going gets tough, and maybe you think I don't see him sloping off after you, but I'm not a fucking idiot, Cas. And you know what? Neither is every fucker else in this goddamn company, and somehow I've managed to keep them off your fucking trail for this long, but I can't do it. I can't keep cleaning up your messes just because you're suddenly this new person who's reckless and carefree--”

Castiel wants to tell him that he's anything but. He wants to tell him that half the time he feels like everything is falling apart, and that when his hands are shaking and he can't breathe, Dean Winchester is the only thing that makes him feel sane. He can't find the words.

"--and you're spinning around like a fucking lovestruck teenager, only you're not a teenager, Cas, you're our commanding officer. You're supposed to be in charge here. You have to lead these people, not disappear five times a week on mysterious extended walks to nowhere with Winchester – I mean, Christ. I honestly can't believe that you haven't been found out yet. Where do you even go all the time? Where do you ever go?" Inias asks, and then, with a voice that turns ice-cold: "Do you fuck him?"

Castiel runs cold. "That's none of your business."

"Actually, fuck you, Cas, it is my business," Inias says. He brings up a hand, points it at Castiel, jabs it sharply into his chest. "I'm the only one who knows where you disappear all the goddamn time, so it is my fucking business. " He jabs again, harder this time, and Castiel takes a step back. "Because unless I get you under control, I won't be the only one who knows for very long, and then you'll get fired, and that'll be on me for not telling you to get your shit together. Unless, of course, someone from the company fucking kills you first."

Castiel's throat closes up. He wants to argue and say that no-one would do that, because he likes to think that the men of Baker do like him, but he's seen what they can do to each other for even the implication of homosexuality. Every man has a loaded weapon; accidents happen. He swallows. "Inias," he says hoarsely.

"God – I hate this," Inias says. "I hate it, because somehow now I'm the asshole for looking out for you. And the worst part is I don't think I've ever seen you like this before. I just – Christ, I wish you'd met anywhere else."

Castiel doesn't say anything – he doesn't think he could – but privately, he knows that if he and Dean had met anywhere else, this wouldn't be happening. He wouldn't have given Dean the time of day. He wouldn't have tolerated him for a second longer than necessary. Maybe that's Castiel's mistake. Maybe the reason he can't keep away from Dean is because he knows it wouldn't last ten minutes in the real world.

“--so please don't think it's because I don't like the Winchester kid, or because I don't like the way you are, but the facts are pretty straight-forward – it's irresponsible. It's dangerous, it's asking for trouble, and frankly, it's just fucking crazy. And I love you, Cas, you know I do, but you have got to stop--”

“I don't want to stop,” Castiel says, barely louder than a whisper, but Inias doesn't hear him.

“--before something really fucks up. Before you get caught, or before you get someone hurt, because we need you. We need you here, with us, not with him, and half the time we can't even find you, and I'm here having to fill your shoes – because I can't let the company go on without a commanding officer, but I sure as hell can't tell Virgil to take over as IC because he'll want to know where you are, and Jesus, I can't fucking win. We need you, okay? This isn't a game,” Inias says. “We're at war here, and I get it, you like him--”

“No,” Castiel says, and is almost as taken aback as Inias at how loud his voice comes out. “No, you don't get it.”

“Cas--”

“You're trying to help, and I appreciate that, I really do, but you have

no idea what you're talking about," Castiel says. He feels unsteady on his feet, and it's only when he curls his hands into fists that he realises he's shaking. "Are you going to tell me about the other fish in the sea, Inias? Do you know anything about it?"

In the faint light from the bunker's lamps, Inias' expression is equal parts pained and irritated, and Castiel can tell that he hates this argument, that he wishes he'd never said anything, but it's too late now.

"You think you know what it's like for me – you think because I kissed you once, and because you patted me on the back in high school, gave me all the *I'm sorry it's okay there'll be others* spiel before, then you know everything there is to know – here's the truth. " Castiel's voice drops down low, icy with anger. He can feel the itch under his skin. "You don't know a fucking thing."

Inias sets his jaw, but for once, he doesn't say anything.

"You think it's easy, the way I just go through life with my head down. Just stay hidden, stay out of trouble. Don't get noticed – that's how I survive, right? Easy not to get noticed. Just don't do anything stupid." Castiel ticks off his fingers, stepping up closer to Inias with every point. "Don't talk to the attractive ones. Make excuses. Don't look too long, don't touch, don't – say – anything. Easy. Because it's all so fucking easy for you. All my life, Inias – my whole fucking life, I have never anything close to this. And forget whether I can keep doing this, whether it's sensible, I don't fucking *want* to give it up. Because Dean--" Castiel doesn't mean to call him Dean; he has *Winchester* ready on his tongue and the wrong thing slips out. He doesn't care. Why the fuck can't he say Dean's name out loud? Why does he have to whisper it under his breath when he's alone, when no-one's in earshot? He says it again. "Dean – is the first person I have ever met who isn't immediately repulsed by the very idea of me."

Inias jerks back, and Castiel is able to picture the flicker of hurt across

his face, and he thinks he might have gone too far. He has always classed Inias in another category to everyone else; in memory, Inias has always been the sweet, tolerant saviour who politely declined his affections and helped to protect him from the rest of the world when it would have crucified him at fifteen years old. In hindsight, the words *I won't tell anyone – we'll pretend it never happened* aren't fucking helpful. They were just another rock in his pocket.

“Including you,” Castiel says, and he steels himself against the way that Inias reels back a step. “And God, yes, Dean scares the shit out of me. But for the first time, I am scared of being too happy, and that is new to me. And it beats being scared of everything else.”

Inias pulls himself up straight. Castiel can't see his face clearly, but when he speaks, his voice is cold. “Do what you want. But he's going to get you in trouble. And when he distracts you – when he lets you down, like I never, ever have – I don't want to know.”

Castiel's stomach twists with an ache like a gut-wound, and he doesn't have a thing to say in response to that. He can't process a way to address Inias revoking his protection – something that was supposed to be unconditional.

“So there you go. You pushed me – remember that. You wanted to know what was wrong. But if you're gonna go back to him now?” Inias says. He holds up his hands in surrender. “Then, fine. I don't care. Go fuck yourself.”

The anger pitching underneath Castiel's skin still has him trembling with tightened jaw and white-knuckled hands, but Inias' words are swirling inside his skull, and as Inias turns and walks away, Castiel tries to put together *I don't know how to do this without you.* He can't speak.

Instead, Castiel turns away from Inias' retreating back so that he doesn't have to watch him leave, and he takes a second just to breathe.

He presses his lips into a thin line to hold himself together, but he can feel a thickness at the back of his mouth that presses insistently in his throat, makes him want to hitch his breath in, but he knows that if he does, it'll be a bruised little noise. He'll want to keep dragging in air in these broken little bursts and before he knows, he'll be crying like a fucking fairy in the middle of the invasion of occupied Brest, and there's no time or place for that. He exhales slowly, shakily. He rubs his thumb against the side of his nose.

Out of instinct, he feels for the warm bronze of his crucifix, and without thinking his lips are moving in silence – *don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help* – and then Castiel realises what he's doing. He lets go of the crucifix.

He doesn't want the word of the Lord. He wants Dean.

Castiel takes slow breaths to steady himself, but it isn't working. Something in his chest is ratcheting tighter and tighter until he feels stretched wire-thin, and he is barely conscious of himself as he walks quickly to find Dean.

He moves through the company without knowing what he's doing; someone tries to speak to him and he goes straight past without so much as a glance at them to see if they're alright. For just this once, Castiel is not interested in knowing whether other people are alright. Castiel is tired of taking care of other people.

He finds Dean sitting in the bottom of the trench with a couple of his friends – Harvelle, Spangler, Tran – and doesn't even think about how

this will look to them. He goes straight over, and thankfully, Dean notices him as he approaches.

Dean looks up, breaking into a smile, and he cuts off what he was saying to the others. “Hey, sir, I've been meaning to tell you – sir?” he cuts himself off as he sees Castiel's face, and the way his expression shifts instantly to worry only makes Castiel feel a thousand times worse. “Sir, you alright?”

“I need to talk to you,” Castiel says, and his voice cracks. He can feel Harvelle and Tran looking at him strangely, but he ignores them. He feels a dull ache in his eyes which he knows means that they're getting red, and he really needs to get out of here with Dean before he does something catastrophic like fall apart in front of his company. “Right now.”

“Yeah, sure,” Dean says. There is concern laced through his every word, and he drops his extra kit immediately to scramble up the side of the embankment and follow when Castiel turns to walk away.

Castiel goes ahead of Dean with quick strides, desperate to put as much distance between him and his men before he cracks. He can feel himself shaking – he trusted Inias, he told him everything – and his breath is coming sharp, ragged now – Inias was supposed to be there for him no matter what happened between them – and God, Dean must think Castiel is a lunatic. He goes into the bunker, moves through rooms of NCOs peering at maps, making sand-tables. He jogs down the stairs to where the prisoners were kept before battalion came to collect them – an open concrete room below ground-level, cold and damp as it is dark. He adjusts his M1, pulls the sling over his head and tucks it underneath his collar, swings the bulk of the rifle behind his shoulder. He unclips his helmet. He runs a hand over the back of his neck.

He can't bring himself to go a step further, and so he stops. He stands and waits for Dean to catch up, lumbering clumsily down the stairs

behind him, and the nervous need to move or break down catches up with Castiel first; he jogs his leg impatiently. Then Dean is there, and doesn't even have to time to catch his breath – Dean lets out an exaggerated wheeze for comic effect, and he starts, “What's the hurry here—” and then Castiel grabs two handfuls of his combat jacket and hauls him in for a bruising kiss.

Dean makes a startled sound against Castiel's lips, but it's lost in the moment because Castiel is losing it. There is a tightness in his throat, a noise sharp like broken glass in his mouth, and he can't keep it back, but he can smother it. Castiel keeps his lips just pressed against Dean's for several seconds, unmoving, but just holding himself together as he is caught up in a whirlwind of all the anger and loss he hasn't felt since he was in high school. Then he pulls back just enough to take in a deep, juddering breath, and he kisses Dean open-mouthed.

He comes in hard enough to send Dean stumbling back a step but he has the grip in his clothes to hold him anchored, and he pushes his tongue into Dean's mouth, a slick, hot slide over his tongue and the roof of his mouth. He kisses him fast and reckless, his mouth hungry and desperate on Dean's, and his hands come up from Dean's jacket to clutch at Dean's face.

Castiel can't breathe. He is shaking so hard he thinks his knees will give out underneath him and somehow Dean Winchester is the only thing that makes him feel real anymore.

Dean nudges away from Castiel's lips just far enough to mutter into the corner of Castiel's mouth, “Sir – are you okay? We gotta – we need to move, sir, anyone could--”

Castiel doesn't answer; he just surges forwards again, captures Dean's lips. He is tired of being careful. He is tired of spending his entire life terrified of what other people will see or hear or find out, and for once he just wants to live like a normal person. He wants ten minutes in the middle of nowhere with Dean, with the heat of their bodies and the

way they move together when there's nothing else to think about. He wants there to be nothing else to think about.

Dean takes a step backwards, pulls Castiel back with him. He takes his hands off him only for a second to fumble with the handle of a small disused side-room, with a cracked mirror on one side, a gas lamp in disuse on the floor,. Dean pulls Castiel inside, and Castiel goes with him, feet blindly moving wherever Dean guides him – he doesn't care. He sucks Dean's bottom lip into his mouth, kisses him again and again with heat and with panic, kisses him hard enough that his lips hurt and his jaw aches and their mouths are spit-slick and shiny. He slips his tongue over the seam of Dean's mouth, licks his way inside; he bites at Dean's lip.

Dean pulls back a second, and the worry across all his face is so vivid and real that something clenches in Castiel's chest and there is a real fucking risk that Castiel is about to fucking cry. “Sir, what's wrong? Are you--?”

“Stop talking,” Castiel says, voice breaking, because, Christ, sometimes he hates that Dean seems to actually care about him – it makes everything so much more difficult. He shoves Dean back hard , the two of them stumbling across the room together, until Dean's back hits the wall, and he kisses him, hands all over his front as he battles with the zip and buttons of Dean's clothing. “Just – stop talking, please stop talking--”

Castiel wrenches Dean's jacket back off his shoulders, shoves his hands up underneath Dean's shirt underneath without even pushing the straps of his suspenders over to take off the slack. He skates his hands down Dean's sides, digs his nails in hard enough that Dean gasps and his hips snap unconsciously forwards against Castiel.

Finally, Dean stops trying to understand what's wrong with Castiel and just goes with it. He grabs at the strap of Castiel's rifle, slings it off sideways to rest on the floor somewhere – Castiel doesn't notice

where, or if it's resting cocking-handle-up like protocol dictates, or if the muzzle is stuck into the dirt and grit on the floor in the way that made him forever chastise his platoon; he just doesn't fucking think about it – and Dean pushes a hand up from the nape of Castiel's neck through his hair. He knocks his helmet sideways, then seems to change his mind as he grabs the helmet in one hand to dispose of it entirely, tossing it aside, and Castiel doesn't care where it lands.

Castiel pushes one leg between Dean's thighs, presses himself in close enough that he can feel Dean's cock against his hip, and when Castiel slides against him, a strangled breath punches out of Dean's chest, and Dean finds Castiel's mouth again. The urgency of it means Dean kisses messily, all teeth and tongue, but it's fierce and desperate , and he rocks his hips against Castiel in incremental little movements, faster and faster.

Castiel takes one hand off Dean's face to unzip his own jacket, but he is distracted because Dean licks into Castiel's mouth, and then Dean's hands are deft and quick on the button and zip of Castiel's combat pants. Dean pushes his hands up over Castiel's body, sweeps his suspenders to the side so that his pants fall slack, and shoves his hands down the back to grab his ass. Dean's hands are cold, but when Castiel jumps at their touch, he pushes forwards against Dean again, and as their cocks drag together, shooting sparks up the length of his spine, he forgets all about the cold.

He reaches down to wrestle with the front of Dean's pants, pushes his hand inside. Dean's mouth stalls on Castiel's, his lips parting, and as Castiel moves his hand over his cock, he makes a short sound that falls somewhere between a grunt and a groan, something low and animal that ignites fire all through Castiel's body. He presses even tighter against Dean, his hips shifting of their own accord to rut against the crease where Dean's thigh meets his pelvis, and the friction is almost good enough to make him forget that everything is falling to shit.

Castiel kisses Dean again, shoves his tongue into Dean's mouth hard, slips over his tongue and teeth, and Dean gives as good as he gets – sucking at Castiel's bottom lip until Castiel's breath snags in his throat,

biting at him. Dean's cock slips through Castiel's hand, the head already slick, and Castiel aches to taste it. He thumbs under the head, over the tip, and Dean shudders against him. His hips pitch forwards into Castiel's touch, his back arching, and he drops his head back to drag in short, laboured breaths.

Dean's hands clutch tight, and Castiel has the feeling that at this point Dean is just holding on for dear life as Castiel touches him – he pants and lets out these choked little noises, a strangled groan, a high gasp, something muttered that sounds like, *fuck, fuck, fuck*. Then Dean's hands slide lower as Castiel rocks up to grind into Dean's hip, and it's because he's distracted by the heat building low in his gut and underneath his skin that he doesn't notice what Dean is doing until he has his hand down behind Castiel's balls and is pulling his hand slowly back up. His fingertips brush over a place that Castiel hasn't touched in a long time – not since before basic training, when he could lock himself in his bedroom and pretend his own hand was somebody else; before he followed Inias into the army and surrounded himself with men who condemned people like him every day – and Castiel jolts against Dean in shock.

“Shit, I'm sorry,” Dean mutters against Castiel's mouth. He pulls back.

Castiel doesn't know what happens next. His head is reeling, and he has Inias' words spinning in his head – *boys don't do that; boys don't do that* – and some distant part of Castiel knows that he doesn't do this, he doesn't let Dean have control like this, but everything is skewed and his mouth is moving before he can think. He kisses Dean open-mouthed, and against his lips, he says, “Please--” His voice is hoarse, rougher even than usual, and he can hear that he sounds desperate. . “Please, I--” Castiel has never said anything before while they do this, and he didn't know he would sound like that. Like he's ruined.

Dean takes one hand out of Castiel's pants, and there is a moment where Castiel feels lit up with shame – he's an idiot, Dean's not like that, Dean's not queer, Dean's not fucked up like Castiel is – and then Dean brings his hand around and pushes his first two fingers into his own mouth.

Castiel's hand slows on Dean's cock, his eyes fixed on the sight of Dean sucking at his own fingers – the shape of his pink, swollen mouth around them; the wet shine of them as he pulls them out. He doesn't think he can breathe. His eyes are caught on the soft curve of Dean's lips, the hint of his teeth and tongue past his open mouth, even as Dean reaches behind Castiel, and then Dean's hand is back at the crack of his ass, and the tip of one finger is pushing inside.

It's uncomfortable, and Castiel stiffens, but after a moment, Dean pulls out, and in spite of the discomfort, Castiel's body misses it. He tilts his hips back for more.

Dean breathes slowly, as he pushes back in, and Castiel lets out a shaky sigh without meaning to, and this time the discomfort isn't so obvious. One hand is motionless on Dean's cock; the other slides down from Dean's face to cling to the front of his shirt. His hands tremble slightly on Dean's clothes, and he tells himself that this is fine. This isn't too much. He isn't giving Dean too much control or the opportunity to destroy him or anything else that could be the final thing to break him apart, and he slowly rocks down onto Dean's finger until it feels as though everything he is vibrates towards Dean.

His body is finely thrumming with want, and he's so hard he can't think straight, and Dean is moving faster now. Castiel presses his cock forwards into Dean's hip again, and there is a brief moment of friction as Dean shifts, dragging Castiel's cock slowly over the skin of his stomach, where heat flares up all through Castiel so fast and overwhelming that all the air in his lungs is punched out in one burst, and the end of it is a high, breathless sound that he's never heard himself make before.

Dean pushes in hard, and a violent shiver rips its way through Castiel's body, something that tips him forwards against Dean's chest, and he presses his lips to the corner of Dean's without moving – just leaving his open mouth there like a wet print, gasping. Dean moves roughly, hard enough that Castiel's body jerks in echo, pulls out slowly so that

Castiel feels every nerve in his body fizzing with how badly he needs it again, and somehow Castiel finds his hips are pitching beyond his control. Forwards into the ridge of Dean's hips as Dean pulls out, then slamming back against Dean's hand as he comes back, his whole body arching to get the angle just right so that Dean can bottom out and fill Castiel as much as possible.

Castiel is gasping, his every breath a strangled burst of sound, and he can't stop – and he doesn't care that he can't stop. He doesn't care that anyone could hear them and walk over to discover Castiel getting his ass fingered open by his senior medic, but Castiel doesn't care because Dean has uncurled his hand and pushed a second finger in alongside the first, and the burning stretch of it is a sweet ache that he never wants to give up.

Dean lets out a long, slow breath that trembles on its way out of his mouth, and Castiel looks up – is he okay? Is he disgusted by this? - and finds Dean's eyes only to see a visceral want there that he has never seen before. In that moment, he realises that Dean is in this as much as he is, and the weight of it hits him like a freight-train, leaves him breathless and more painfully turned on than he thinks he has ever been in his life. Dean Winchester wants to fuck him.

Castiel can't break eye-contact even though somewhere in the back of his head he remembers, *we don't do this, we don't look at each other while we do this* – because god, Dean wants him and Castiel doesn't want to stop him. He's shaking in Dean's hands, and Dean is looking at him as though he's worth something, and Castiel has never wanted to kiss him more than in this moment. It scares the shit out of him; he doesn't do it.

He looks away, down at his hands clenched into the fabric of Dean's clothing. He doesn't know when he stopped jerking Dean off, now that he realises he is doing nothing but holding on, but Dean doesn't seem to care. As Castiel rolls back into Dean's hand again and again, there is a dull, uncomfortable clinking – there is something digging into his collarbone everything he moves – and without thinking about it, Castiel digs a hand down under his shirt and yanks his crucifix

roughly over his head. His dog-tags come with it, and he doesn't distinguish between the two; he just drops them and replaces his hands on Dean's chest, one sliding up to cup the side of his neck – for better leverage. His thumb brushes distractedly over Dean's pulse-point; his fingers are curled into his hair. He does it because it's easier to move with a point of anchorage. The tip of his thumb maps out freckles on Dean's throat, but he does it for leverage.

Castiel can't stop pushing his hips forwards against Dean, because everything is too much and he's desperate for the right kind of contact, to bring him closer to the edge, and because there is a dull ache in his chest that doesn't hurt so much at the moment of the split-second flash-fire in his gut when he grinds into Dean's hip. He doesn't think about that. He doesn't think about everything shattering around him. He doesn't think about his legs wobbling underneath him and the burn at the back of his eyes; he just takes what Dean will give him.

Then Dean moves a hand between them, slides down to take Castiel's cock in hand, and Castiel feels as though he can't breathe. He bites down on his bottom lip until it hurts, and then some, and then there is blood in Castiel's mouth and the harsh sting and salt of it keeps him steady for a few seconds longer. He has a few more seconds by which to hold himself together, but it's not enough.

He is shaking so much that his knees feel no more than a split-second from collapsing underneath him, because he's so close it's painful, he's so fucking close, and he wants it. He finds his hands tight into Dean's clothing, clutching desperately, and he is letting out these short, ragged gasps, and somehow they are turning into words - “please, please, please” and he can hear himself saying *God, please*, even though God has no place in this, and saying *fuck, fuck, please* and he doesn't know what else.

Dean's hand is unrelentingly fast on his cock now, jerking him closer, his other hand shoving up hard and fast into Castiel like he's fucking him properly, and if Castiel doesn't look at Dean, he can pretend that it's his cock and not his hand. As Castiel presses his face into his shoulder with a choked noise, Dean says, “Come on, come on, I got

you--”

Castiel tries to keep his mouth closed, to set his jaw tightly against the words spilling out unbidden over his tongue, but he's struggling to breathe and he presses his open mouth wetly against the side of Dean's neck, as he fucks himself back and forth between Dean's two hands.

He's so close, the heat of it rising sharp and tight up through his body, and he clings to Dean to keep him upright, presses him back into the wall as he edges closer, and then Dean says, “Come on,” again - “It's okay, Cas, I got you--” and Castiel comes so hard that a strangled cry breaks out of his throat and everything stops.

There is a long moment where Castiel 's brain is incoherent, and he is just pressed against Dean's body with his cock in Dean's hand and two fingers up his ass, and he drags in deep, shaky breaths and comes down.

Cas.

As Castiel settles from the high, everything else comes back – the guilt and the fear like a rock in the pit of his stomach, the self-loathing painted thick as grease on his skin. He pushes himself away from Dean – not even thinking about how Dean is still hard and breathing heavily and still looking at him as though he wants him in the dirtiest possible way. Castiel pulls up his combat pants, fastens the button, and slowly twists his shoulders through his suspenders. He doesn't look at Dean.

Castiel waits to stop shaking. He doesn't, and every second that passes, the strange sense of cold seeps deeper into him, and his old fears are all coming back to him – but stronger now, because now he knows that it's all true. Inias was right. Castiel is losing control.

He let himself become putty in Dean's hands. He was in charge when this began, the way it should have been – he pushed at Dean, he took what he wanted – and then somehow it changed until Dean was making him soft and vulnerable and compliant. Twisting him up inside until he would do whatever Dean wanted – or whatever Castiel wanted, even if that wasn't a viable option.

He used to be able to separate who he had to be and who he wanted to be – that was easy. He stayed private and reserved in front of his men, and he claimed to pass off dates and socialising because of wanting to concentrate on his responsibilities, and so it became the truth. Dean is blurring all the lines.

Inias was right.

Castiel tries to concentrate on his job, and then Dean comes along as part of the job, and Castiel can't get away from his green eyes and his gentle hands and his arrogant smile, and he can't escape the fact that his heart is racing every time he fucking looks at him, and there is no way he can get anything done when he looks over at his senior medic and can't think a goddamn thing about what he's supposed to be doing, because his whole brain is *Dean, Dean, Dean.* And Dean doesn't give a shit about any of it, because he can do whatever he wants, and Castiel is so gone on him that he lets him – and the more he thinks about it, the more Castiel finds that everything is coming back to the same thing – to *Cas.* To his name on Dean's lips like he belongs there, even though Castiel has explicitly told him that Dean is not allowed to call him that. It is beating through Castiel's blood now, pounding inside his skull.

Castiel takes shaky steps away from Dean as he adjusts his suspenders, zips up his combat jacket. He has painted boundaries in the sand, one after another, and day by day Dean is stepping over every fucking one of them. Don't kiss me. Don't distract me. Don't try to be my friend. Don't call me that. Dean doesn't care about any of it – he does whatever he wants, and Castiel lets him because he is weak. He's a

spineless fucking fairy who is just so goddamn grateful to have a boy even look at him the way he wants to be looked at that he lets himself be corroded away to nothing, until he's useless, and he can feel his body tightening into something hot and angry. It's the only way he can recognise himself.

He is losing control. Castiel is out of control and Dean thinks he can do what he likes, and if Castiel isn't already ruined, then Dean is going to ruin him.

“Uhhh,” Dean says, behind him, and Castiel recognises that Dean has stepped forwards, following him. “Everything okay?”

Castiel balls his hands into fists. Dean has done this to him. Dean has made him this way – fragile, and pathetic, and too emotional to do his own goddamn job. He needs to be calm. More than anything, to be an effective commander, he needs to be calm, and he doesn't remember how.

All that hurt and instability from his fight with Inias' is flooding back to him now, and he doesn't know how to process it, so it is curling in his gut until he feels full to the brim with anger and he wants to break something. He wants to just snap, to allow himself to be without control for once, and to hit something until it splinters underneath his knuckles and his hand aches and he is empty. He needs to remember how to be empty.

Castiel turns.

The concern is clear on Dean's face, who still stands a few feet away with his shirt untucked and his suspenders hanging loose at his sides. He opens his mouth as though he's going to say something, but as he looks at Castiel, something in his expression falters. His eyes dart nervously. “What?”

Castiel moves slowly towards him.

Dean takes a step backwards. The apprehension is clear on his face, but he's not afraid of Castiel – he has his jaw set tight, his stance tall and solid, like he's ready for anything. “Sir?”

Dean is not afraid of Castiel, and somehow Castiel can't stop thinking that he wants to change that. He takes slow, measured steps towards him, and he doesn't once break eye contact with Dean, who he can see swallows, whose eyes flit away from Castiel and back again. He wets his lips, swallows again.

At that point, Castiel has not yet decided what he is going to do. He has this trembling, white-hot rage all through his body, and it curls his hands into fists tight enough that the palms of his hands sting, and he breathes unsteadily. He's furious, but he's unsure of himself, and he has not yet decided what to do, and then Dean speaks.

Dean clears his throat. He tries, “Cas--”

Castiel slams him back against the wall so hard it winds him – one hand flat on Dean's sternum, the other pressed hard against his throat – and as Dean gasps for air, blinking from the shock, Castiel leans in close.

“You ever call me that again,” he says, voice low, “and I'll kill you.”

Dean stares back at him, eyes wide and unflinching. He lifts a hand – carefully, as though trying not to spook a wild animal – and sets it other Castiel's own hand, where it rests on Dean's chest with a handful of his shirt.

Dean holds his eyes, and Castiel has no idea what's happening, except that he is weakening, and there is Dean: brushing the back of Castiel's hand with his thumb.

When he speaks, Dean's voice is hoarse, breathless, from the attack, but steady. “So fucking do it, then.”

Castiel's breath catches in his throat, and he doesn't know what to do.

Dean cocks an eyebrow, arrogant as anything. He says, “Castiel,” quietly, and then, “Cas,” and in his mouth it doesn't sound like a challenge anymore. It sounds perfect.

He still has his hand over Castiel's, his thumb rubbing slow, comforting circles. Castiel is still stretched thin, still almost vibrating with anger and the desire to hit something until it breaks, until his knuckles are raw and bloody, until his arms hurt and he can't move and he doesn't have to think anymore – but somehow it's not happening like that.

He is shaking. There is the thickness in his throat again, and the backs of his eyes sting like he's been awake for too long, As he breathes, the sound of it is rough and wobbling, and Castiel swallows hard, but it doesn't steady him. He feels as though he is crumbling entirely, and the only point of his entire body that feels real is his hand underneath Dean's.

Castiel yanks his hand away and takes quick, stumbling steps to put distance between him and Dean. He rubs a hand over his face, rakes his fingers back through his sweaty hair, and he takes deep breaths.

He can feel Dean behind him still, watching his turned back, and Castiel doesn't know what to do with the way that he is aching to go back to him. He retrieves his helmet and rifle from the ground, rubs roughly at his eyes until the skin underneath feels sore, and then he wipes off his hands on his combat pants. He walks away from him.

Chapter End Notes

FURTHER NOTES: I know that some of Cas' behaviour with Dean (you know... deliberately trying to hurt/scare him in that end scene) in this chapter is very, very icky. What I'm working with here at this point is season five Cas, complete with an nice KFC bucket of repression, self-loathing, and anger management problems (Point of No Return alley scene, anyone?) B U T I want to make clear here that it isn't something I'm condoning/ dismissing/saying is acceptable AT ALL – it is going to be addressed, at length, in the future, and it is going to be a part of Cas' development, so fear not, and I'm sorry for writing such uncomfortable garbage!! I hope you're all okay!

Chapter 11: Brest: Recouvrance

8th September, 1944

Dear Sam,

Hey there, sorry you haven't heard from me in a while. It's been pretty rough down here! We finally got through to taking this position we've been working on for weeks, but fuck, it cost us. A couple of my friends got taken off the line injured – none of them dead, but some of them are probably pretty fucked up for life, you know? I'm lucky. And that's not all, either, there's a lot of... I don't know how to explain it. Guys are having trouble dealing with everything that's happened. Joe's getting a little jumpy, Ed Zeddmore keeps making these shitty jokes about being nocturnal, how he can barely stay awake in the field and can't sleep at night, and we're all laughing them off because Ed, he's such a fucking clown, we love him, but – I know he's not kidding around and the others neither. And Lieutenant Novak, me and him, we're not friends. But I know him. I know him and he's – it doesn't matter. He had a hard time these last few days. We're just tired, probably. I'd do us some good to get taken off the line.

According to Novak, we're getting off the line real soon. The 115th has already been taken off west somewhere for a break, and we've just gotta hold [redacted] for the British 141st's tank guys to come through and take it off our hands so we can get the hell outta Dodge. I'm pretty excited about it. I mean, word's going around from Sergeant Garrigan – he's got a friend in the 115th, see, and he wrote him a note when he got off the line, 'cause I guess he had nothing better to do – and word is there's hot food and showers out west. You hear that? We're gonna feel like real people again. God, what I'd give for the water pressure back home and a goddamn pie.

How are you doing anyway? Enough about me. You heard back about that paper yet? Not to worry you if you haven't, I mean, I'm sure it's just mixed up in the college, it won't be bad news. No news is good news, right? And congratulate Jess for me! That's a hell of a score, and she sounds like a hell of a girl. I'm so proud of both of you. Remember to pack clean underwear

when you go, I'm not saying they don't have water in Denver, but her family might get a little wigged out by you washing your panties all over the place. And don't sweat it, they'll love you. If she does, they will too.

I gotta run, but I'll write again as soon as I can! When we come off the line, I should be able to write you every day on what's going on, though it won't be anything more interesting than 'Sam, I shined my boots today'. Still better than being in the field! We'll talk soon. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116 th Infantry Regiment

29 th Infantry Division

United States Army

9 th September, 1944

Castiel scrubs his hands down over his face, tips his head back, and takes a second just to appreciate the luxury: hot water. Baker got pulled off the front-line after La Trinité, the division opting to lean more heavily on the 115th for a few days, and this small village overrun by battalion staff is, for the time being heaven, heaven. They're well into Allied territory, out of range of enemy guns: it's the safest Castiel has felt in a long time. There's hot food, and showers, and real latrines, and a couple of the guys from Fox Company have put basketball hoops made from old barbed wire. If Castiel squints past the rubble and the Shermans at the perimeter, it's almost as good as it was back in England.

Most of the men are having lunch while Castiel showers – and does laundry, considering the heap of wet socks around his feet that slowly seep brown and red down the drain. He can feel four months' worth of sweat and grime running over off his skin; he has even got rid of the itch of dried blood in his hair. Castiel revels in it.

Each man only has so long allocated to him in the showers, so Castiel hurries up washing, squeezes out his socks under the spray, and heads out to where he has his things neatly folded on the bench outside. He hates getting back into his dirty clothes, but at least he's a good deal cleaner than he was. He only has one leg into his combat pants when he hears a wolf-whistle behind him.

“Looking good, lieutenant!” Corporal Harvelle yells over, and Castiel looks over through the wet ends of his hair to see Harvelle grinning – with Bradbury and Dean beside him.

“Thank you,” Castiel says, and he pulls up his pants. His legs are peppered with small bruises, his knees especially so, but he ignores the dull ache of them, and he reaches for his under-shirt.

“You gonna play later?” Harvelle asks, coming over.

“Play what?”

“Basketball, sir. Baker versus Able.”

Castiel scrunches up his nose. “I'll be there for support, but I'm not much good at sport,” he says apologetically. Not entirely true – Castiel is one of the fittest men in Baker, or at least he was, back in England, and while his hand-eye coordination leaves much to be desired, he can play passably. However, Castiel has recently become concerned about his being too attached to his men. He shouldn't have frozen up with Sergeant Lafitte, and he doesn't even like to think about the near-catastrophe that was his mental lapse at seeing Gallagher injured. He needs to keep his distance, and playing basketball with the men will surely not help.

“That's alright, sir,” Bradbury says. “We can have you as a kind of

mascot.”

Castiel gives him a small smile. “How are you doing, Bradbury? I wouldn't have expected to see you out of the aid station yet.”

“It was only my ass, sir, I'm fine.”

Harvelle nudges playfully at Bradbury's shoulder. “Yeah, sir, he's got plenty to go around.”

Castiel wears that polite, careful smile like a shield still, and he turns it towards Dean. “And you, Winchester?”

Dean's eyes are on Castiel's stomach where Castiel lifts his shirt to tuck it into his pants; he startles, and looks up quickly. “What about me, sir?”

“How are you doing?” Castiel asks, his tone a calculated blend of friendly professionalism.

This is something new that he's trying – he talks to Dean regularly, and in a manner that is civil, but only ever with other people around. He is still annoyed at Dean for what happened in the wake of the battle to keep La Trinité, although that anger has dissipated somewhat since being able to relax with showers and hot food, but he knows from hard experience that attempting to simply cut Dean out altogether doesn't work. Besides, he doesn't want to get rid of Dean altogether, because that would send some kind of message to Inias that Castiel thinks he's right – which, of course, he does, but Inias doesn't need to know that. So this is how it goes now: he talks to Dean politely and often, and not to Inias at all.

Castiel isn't going to pretend that things haven't been hard since the counter-attack on La Trinité, and everything else that happened that morning, but he's fine. After leaving Dean, he gave himself some time to breathe and calm down, and then he employed his usual technique of pushing down all that anger and hopelessness so that he doesn't have to think about it, and now he is back to his usual self. They were on the front line for another two days, during which time he and Inias seemed to have to the same conclusion separately – that cold civility is the way forwards, and otherwise, silence.

On the other hand, Dean seems to have had no such thoughts about how to proceed with Castiel. He is just himself, as ever, and Castiel thinks perhaps that Dean is incapable of that kind of emotional deceit. It would explain a lot, but it's infuriating. Nonetheless, Castiel is an adult, and he can cope. He can be the bigger man.

Dean pulls a face, nods his head. “I'm doing okay, sir, can't complain,” he answers.

“That's good to hear.” Castiel pauses. “Are you going to be playing later?”

“Yeah, I'm signed on for it, but I dunno how good I'm gonna be.” Dean winces. “I never was much good at basketball – I'll probably get my ass kicked.”

Castiel almost smiles. “In that case, I'll definitely be there.”

Harvelle laughs, and that breaks through to get Castiel's attention; he looks over. “Okay,” Harvelle says, with an amused look between the two of them. “Is it me or has hell finally frozen over between you two? You almost get along.”

Castiel looks at Dean, eyebrows slightly raised, and Dean only smirks back at him.

“Yeah,” Dean says at last. “Yeah, you know, actually, you're right. I think it took the good lieutenant a while to get used to my sense of humour, but we got there.”

“I respectfully disagree,” Castiel says, and he turns his polite smile to Harvelle and Bradbury. “I believe it's because it took Sergeant Winchester a while to learn to respect boundaries.”

“Okay, well, respectfully, I don't know that I ever really did anything that offensive.”

Castiel's smile turns strained. He can see Harvelle and Bradbury flitting nervous little glances at each other, but everything is fine. He and Dean are being civil. “Well, that's a matter of opinion,” Castiel says calmly, and he turns back to face him. “Additionally, I think what you did was never technically the point.”

Dean grins as wide as anything. “That's funny, because I was so sure that what I did was satisfactory.”

Irritation flares in Castiel's gut – in spite of all his attempts to be collected and distant. Dean is being deliberately difficult. As well as that, he has no right to bring things up so overtly in front of other people, and now he's put Castiel in an awkward position where things will look increasingly suspect if he avoids responding or tries to downplay this as anything untoward. He takes a slow breath to steady himself, and, quietly, he says, “The standard of the execution was not the issue and you know that.”

Dean's grin spreads wider, cockier. “So the execution *was* good.”

“Leave it, Winchester,” Castiel snaps, and Christ, he can't believe he allowed himself to forget for a single moment that this is Dean Winchester – brash, arrogant, and deliberately infuriating.

“Well, I think you spoke too soon,” Bradbury says brightly to Harvelle, and Castiel knows he's joking, trying to dissolve the tension, but it isn't working, and all it does is irritate him further.

Castiel restrains himself from saying something unprofessional, and instead he does his best to fall back into his practiced cool officer superiority. Let the men think he's an asshole; he doesn't care.

He busies himself with his other tasks of the day – running calisthenics with four-platoon, practising whole-company extended-order drills in the fields nearby, writing action reports and attending briefing after briefing with battalion staff to ensure that everything is running smoothly. According to battalion, they probably won't be back onto the front line for another few days at least, but they still need to be prepared.

He eats alone at lunch, and he doesn't think about what Inias is doing at that moment. He doesn't think about how Inias makes friends everywhere he goes, and probably has a hundred different options for who to eat with and talk to. He cleans and tests his rifle, and he makes his rounds at the aid station, and when the time of the inter-company basketball game comes around, Castiel makes his way to the impromptu court set up, and he settles on the sidelines far from the central group of Baker's men.

There are soldiers – enlisted and officer alike – stripping down to their T-shirts to play, combat jackets balled up and tossed to the sidelines, and Lieutenant Virgil is refereeing on the promise that he will show no favouritism to the men from his platoon, but the ball has only been in play for two minutes or so, and already there is outrage about how

Private Miller's penalty is deemed to be unfair.

“God, I hate basketball.”

Castiel glances over to see First Sergeant Mark Masters beside him, his chin propped in his hand, looking thoroughly disinterested.

“You don't have to watch it,” Castiel points out.

“Only, yeah, I do, sir,” Masters says, dry. “I have to support these idiots in everything they do.”

Castiel feels the beginnings of a smile on his mouth. He looks out towards the game again, where Jack Montgomery has just missed a shot on the hoop and is being verbally abused by all sides. “Don't worry, I won't tell anyone,” he says.

Masters looks over sharply. “Tell them what?”

“That you actually like them.” Castiel raises his eyebrows. “Your reputation is safe with me.”

Masters scoffs in the back of his throat. “Respectfully, sir--”

Castiel inhales slowly as a way to brace himself, because he has never heard a respectful phrase follow a sentence starting like that.

“--you gave me this role. I didn't ask for it,” Masters finishes, and

Castiel is pleasantly surprised at the lack of barb there.

“Sergeant, no-one asks to be promoted,” Castiel tells him, and thinks too late that he's said too much. That could be interpreted as dissatisfaction at Castiel's being in command, or resentment; he could be seen as griping. There is a split-second of panic in Castiel's gut that someone is going to report this back to battalion staff, but thankfully, the moment passes as Private Spangler twists in his seat in front of them to look back with a grin.

“No shit, sir,” Spangler says,. “I've been telling y'all for months I should be Supreme Commander, and does anybody listen?”

Next to Spangler, Private Tran bursts out laughing. “Crap, so that's why we're not getting anywhere with the Krauts! We're doing it all wrong.”

“I'm calling it,” Spangler says. “We gotta have a regime change. Put me in charge, we'll be home by Christmas.”

“I'll put in a good word for you,” Castiel says. “I'm sure Eisenhower would be delighted to resign.”

In front of them, Rudy Doe ducks past Morvey and Harvelle, almost bowling over a replacement soldier, and lands a spectacular point from behind the three-point line etched out in cam cream on the cracked asphalt. Castiel doesn't know what the score is, or who's winning, but those on the sidelines are roaring and he stands up with the rest of them to applaud.

The game is good. Almost the whole company is turned out here, and the men are happy, yelling obscenities at each other. There are more people on each team than Castiel thinks is technically allowed, and

there are some injuries as they jostle aggressively with each other, but it's the most relaxed Castiel has seen Baker in a long time, and even Lieutenant Hester looks like he might be on his way to enjoying himself.

Inias is one of the teams, but Castiel is staying professional and cheering for everyone; Dean is on the same team, but they seem to be managing fine with each other, and in all honesty, Dean is so bad at basketball that both teams seem to just be trying to keep him out from under their feet.

Somehow, against all odds, Dean gets hold of the ball, and Castiel is impartial, treating him as he would any other member of the company with a chance at a point, but Dean moves fast past Quentin towards the hoop, and Castiel holds his breath.

Private Morvey flails his arms for Dean's attention, hopping up and down. “Hey, doc, this way!”

“Pass the ball,” Corporal Mills yells as he goes past. “Dean, don't--”

Dean tries to shoot.

There is a dramatic yell of anguish from someone further down the makeshift court, but Castiel doesn't see who, because he is too busy watching the ball fly horrendously wide of the hoop. It goes far left, bounces off the back wall of the *mairie*, and then ricochets back down the road towards an oncoming scout car.

There are three soldiers squawking in dismay as they run to retrieve the ball, and then Corporal Harvelle is reaching up to smack Dean over the head, and Castiel can hear Dean defend himself - “I'm gonna get it one day! One day, I'm gonna get it!”

“No, you're not,” Corporal Mills says. “You are never, and I mean *never,* going to score.”

“Speak for yourself, Johnny,” Doe calls over, and Mills shoots him a deadly look, and Castiel nearly smiles, because he hasn't forgotten the basketball game at Fort Belvoir where Mills not only missed the hoop, but also got the basketball trapped on the roof of the mess hall, and clearly neither has anyone else.

“Yeah, I'm pretty sure the doc's got a better chance of scoring than you have,” Zeddmore teases. “Or have you heard from your girl lately?”

“Betty's fine, thanks for asking!” Mills shouts over, complete with an obscene hand gesture, and then, while a handful of three-platoon NCOs are over talking to the scout cars – presumably all *I'm sorry* and *please don't tell Major Singer* – there is Dean on the side-lines.

He stands in front of Castiel, scratching a hand through the back of his hair, and he grins as wide as anything. “Did you see that last shot, sir?” he excitedly asks.

“The one you missed, you mean?”

“The one I – yeah, I mean, yeah, the one I missed, but it was so good,” Dean says, and somehow he doesn't even seem deterred by the fact that the ball didn't even make it through the hoop. “If it'd gone in, it would've been amazing.”

“Shame it didn't,” Masters comments wryly.

Dean holds his hands up in surrender, and Castiel doesn't look at the glint of sweat on his biceps, the way his T-shirt sticks to his shoulders and chest in the summer heat. “Alright, alright, I get it,” Dean says. “I'm a dumb fathead who ruins everything and I'll never take another shot – you happy now, Mark?”

“Ooh, delighted.”

“You were doing well before you took the shot,” Castiel says, and he has no idea why he decided that was a good idea, because Sergeant Masters and Dean both look at him in surprise. For Christ's sake, he's still angry at Dean. He isn't supposed to be saying nice things to him.

“Sir,” Dean says, and he flattens a hand over his collarbone in the exaggerated manner of a flustered dame. “I do declare, was that praise from Lieutenant Novak?”

Castiel fights the urge to roll his eyes. “No.”

“What do you think, First Sergeant?” Dean asks, and his grin is spreading wider and wider. “That sound like praise to you?”

Masters leans back against the wall, smirking. “That sounded positively complimentary.”

Castiel wants to tell them both to fuck off, but it is almost slightly funny, and he is going to deliver a scathing retort that will stun them both into silence, but then his eyes move briefly over Dean's shoulder and he catches Inias' eye.

Castiel's good humour fades instantly. There is a moment where

something painful twists in his gut, and he won't say he misses Inias, or that he wishes he had never forced Inias to say all those terrible things to him, but something aches in him. He almost feels homesick.

“I'm sorry,” Castiel says eventually, as he comes to realise that Dean and Sergeant Masters are still staring at him, expectant. “Please excuse me. Good luck with the rest of the game.”

He stands, zips up his combat jacket, and steps neatly past Dean. He is careful to give himself enough space to pass; he dodges bumping his shoulder. Castiel steadies his helmet on top of his head, and he doesn't let himself listen in to Dean and Mark Masters as he walks away – he doesn't need to be told again that he's a standoffish asshole.

Behind him, he hears the roar of approval as three-platoon's NCOs come back with the basketball, and the game begins again. Castiel adjusts his helmet and keeps going.

10 th September, 1944

Castiel can't sleep. He has checked his watch and found it to be a little after four in the morning, which means that there's only two more hours before he's due to be awake anyway, but Lieutenant Virgil snores like a steam engine, and Castiel has been counting sheep for longer than he cares to. This situation isn't helped by the fact that sheep keep twisting in his head into the faces of men he's got killed. There is only one rational thing left to do. Castiel rolls out of bed and gets dressed.

He gets out of the barracks without disturbing anyone, aside from Inias mumbling something indistinctly as he passes, and then he is out

in the dark and the early morning chill. He isn't entirely sure what to do now. He zips up his combat jacket against the cold, and then he changes his mind; takes it off, ties the sleeves around his waist. He adjusts his rifle sling over his shoulder, and he starts to run.

Castiel starts off slowly – it's been a long time since he went running without machine-gun fire at his heels at the very least – but it's easy. He falls back into it without a second thought, and he thinks of long, snaking cross-country trails through the woods past Bedford High School; he thinks of soft-ribboned medals on his mother's shelf; of Inias puffing behind him and complaining all the way. He remembers being young and angry and thinking that he could outrun the things about himself that were wrong and broken, that he could leave them behind. He remembers how he used to go running instead of talking to people, and that it's a habit he probably still needs to work on breaking.

There are a few privates on sentry duty who he scares half out of their wits, but he reassures them that everything is fine – he has to pull up his combat jacket and show them the two gold bars of the first lieutenant to entirely appease them – and then he is gone.

He runs hard, pushing himself until he doesn't have to think. His thoughts are on the steady drum of his boots on the gravel, the in and out of his own breathing. He curls his hands into fists.

Castiel circles back towards the village, making for the main road, and then he cuts across the intersection past the barracks, and loops around a mile or so on the other side of the village. He counts steps – goes for a hundred and forces himself a little faster, repeat. His muscles are starting to ache by the two-mile point; it's been a while.

He runs faster, faster, and he breaks through to a strange point where he can't hear himself anymore. The sound of his feet hitting the ground is gone, and there is only the raspy sound of his breathing, quicker and quicker as he starts to tire. There is the dull pound of

blood inside his head, a sound that builds and builds until it's thunderous. He feels that he can't even be sure he is still running, but his legs are moving. He has to keep going.

There is something pulling tight inside Castiel's chest as he runs, and he can feel it snagging his breath with every exhalation. He only realises that it's panic when his skull is echoing with gunfire. Someone is screaming.

Pull back, pull back.

Castiel clenches his fists tight enough that his fingernails bite into the meat of his hand. The pain is sharp, stinging, and very far away.

Sir, you gotta get Private Jackman. Sir, he was right in front of me, he got hit too. You gotta get him.

One foot in front of the other. Castiel pushes himself faster, but truthfully he doesn't know where he's going. He can feel his calf muscles tensing painfully, and he is going to regret this if he doesn't ease up, but even as he thinks that he needs to slow down, his body is in a state of nervous shut-down. Keep going. Keep going. If you stop, you'll get hit. They need you.

Pull back.

Castiel stumbles. He nearly turns his ankle over, nearly falls flat on his face, and so instead he comes skidding to a halt that tears pain up all through his leg muscles. All the air bursts out of his lungs in a gasp. His rifle smacks him in the back of the head.

He doubles over, bracing his hands on his knees, and he tries to breathe.

Everything is fine. He is here. He is on a gravel road in the north-western corner of Le Conquet north-west of Brest, and it's coming up to oh-five-hundred hours when the world is soft and quiet, not yet full of arguing soldiers and military strategy. No-one is shooting at him.

Slowly, Castiel straightens. He stretches his hand at his side, pulls at his fingers until the joints pop and crack. He rubs at his knuckles. He is here.

Castiel stretches to relieve the pain in his calves, and he sets off at a slow walk to return to the village. The sun is coming up overhead, hazy and almost white behind the cloud cover. He doesn't let himself limp.

He shrugs back into his combat jacket as he comes close, turning the collar down so that the men on sentry can see the insignia of his rank, and he slings his rifle sling over his shoulder in proper form. He's sweaty now, but he can deal with that after he gets some food.

However, as Castiel walks down the road through the village in search of the kitchen truck, he catches sight of Inias coming down the steps of the second battalion officers' barracks. His heart sinks.

For a moment, Castiel childishly considers turning and walking back the other way – but he's an adult. He is Baker Company's commanding officer. He is not scared of Inias.

Castiel takes a deep breath and walks straight past.

“Cas,” Inias says as he notices him, and Christ, but he actually sounds relieved to see him. “I was looking for you – can we talk?”

“I'm busy,” Castiel mutters, and he keeps going.

Inias follows. “Bullshit are you busy, it's not even reveille yet.”

Castiel ignores him.

“Come on, don't do this. Please, Cas? It'll only take a second.”

“I said I was busy,” Castiel snaps.

“Seriously, just stop,” Inias says. “Please, I – Jesus. I only want to fucking apologise.”

Castiel stops. He looks back over his shoulder at him.

“You still busy?” Inias says, voice heavy and he cocks his eyebrows.

Castiel hesitates, considering. “It can wait,” he says slowly.

“Thanks.” Inias glances at the road behind them. “Uhh - should we walk?”

Castiel throws him a pointed look. “I thought I wasn't allowed to go

for walks.”

Inias groans. “Alright, smart-ass. Let's walk.” He grabs hold of Castiel's arm to steer him away down the road, and against his better judgement, Castiel lets him.

They walk in silence, and Inias lets go of Castiel's arm. They look at their feet. Castiel doesn't say anything; he just walks. If Inias wants Castiel to go first, then he's going to be waiting a long time.

“Okay,” Inias says eventually. “Okay. I'm just going to--” He takes a deep breath. “Here we go. Basically, what I want to say here is I'm sorry, okay?”

Castiel doesn't look at him.

Inias keeps going. “You know, I was a real ass, and I said some really shitty things, and it was way out of line. I get that.” He glances at Castiel. “I mean, you do need to be more careful, and you gotta learn to time things better--”

Castiel stops walking and turns back the way they came. “I'm going to get breakfast, I'm not listening to this.”

“Whoa, Jesus, stop.” Inias catches Castiel by the sleeve and holds him still. “Christ. It's like talking to a toddler.”

Castiel narrows his eyes.

“A very angry toddler. Okay.” Inias sighs. “Listen. You do need to watch yourself better, because I can't always do it for you. But – and there is a 'but' here, see? You just had to be patient enough to wait for it – but I was an asshole about it. And I'm sorry. Honestly, I think I was just – shit, I don't know. Jealous.”

Castiel's head snaps over to look at him, and there's a weird twist in his gut that he thought was past him.

He can only stare at Inias, mouth slack, and he doesn't know what his face betrays of what he feels, but Inias glances up at him, and immediately cringes. “No, shit. I'm sorry. Not like – I just.”

Castiel nods. He looks down the road towards the barracks, over which the sun is rising, misty and pale. It doesn't matter either way, because he doesn't feel that way about Inias anymore, but there was a bizarre moment where Castiel had been processing what it would mean if Inias loved Castiel the way Castiel had wanted him to for years.

The moment wasn't longer enough for him to assess the possibility properly – of course, it doesn't matter anyway, because Inias is still a normal man, who likes women – but there had been a strange few seconds where Castiel had thought of the complications if Inias had loved him when he still wanted Dean over anyone else.

“You know, we've been friends for coming up to fifteen years, and I guess – God, I'm gonna sound like such an asshole saying this out loud – I think I got a little too used to being your only friend,” Inias says regretfully. “I mean - you not being good with girls, you choosing not to talk to most guys – I mean, of course, we had mutual friends, like Bartholomew, Benjamin, those guys, but... I always came first to you.”

Castiel stares at him. He doesn't know what to say, except that he'd

always thought he was a pain to Inias – someone he liked enough to drag around with him, but who slowed him down with social awkwardness and an inherent inability to have fun. They joined the military together, got put in the same company, and all along it seemed as though Inias was best friend to all the men – the friendly officer everyone loved – and that Castiel was the one who made sure they all got the job done.

Castiel knows he's not terribly interesting, and so has been long used to getting left behind. He had never thought that being second-choice was new to Inias.

“I just – I never really had to share you before the way I have to with Winchester,” Inias says.

“Share me?” Castiel repeats.

“Come on, you know what I mean.” Inias shifts uncomfortably. He scratches at the inside of his arm. “I just... I don't know. Got used to always being the most important person in your life, I guess.”

“Inias,” Castiel says, and he's not getting upset again, but there is this ache in his chest and his throat hurts. He swallows. “You still are.”

“Cas, no, come on.” Inias looks away. “And even if I was, okay – I get now that it's not... my right. You know, I gotta deserve it, and the way I've been acting--”

“Inias, stop.” Castiel's voice is strained. He doesn't want to do this. He doesn't want to talk about how he feels right now. “Don't.”

“It's okay.” Inias shrugs. “I get it. I'm not always gonna be your number one person, and that's fine.”

Guilt bubbles inside Castiel until he feels he's dissolving in it. He has to say something. “Inias, you know--” he starts, and he can't get any further. His mind is on the split-second when a ridiculous misunderstanding meant that Castiel thought Inias was saying he was in love with him – and the moment after that when, without meaning to, Castiel thought, *I want Dean instead.* Castiel pushes it down. “You know I'd always--”

“What?”

Castiel claps an awkward hand to Inias' shoulder; he's never been very good at physical gestures of affection. Then again, he's never been good at it verbally either. The corners of his mouth turn in a small smile. “You know that if I had to choose, you or Winchester, I'd pick you every time,” Castiel lies.

11th September, 1944

Oh-nine-hundred hours is too early to be looking at maps. Distantly, Castiel is aware that he has looked at maps far worse than this, at far earlier hours, but time off the front line is making him soft, and irrationally, he wants to go back to bed. Irrational because he knows he wouldn't sleep if he were there – but he likes to think about the relative luxury of his bedding roll.

S-2 Zachariah Everett flattens the map with one hand and points north of the Penfeld estuary with the other. “Expect heavy artillery stationed up here – although, of course, the 175th will be taking the brunt of it as they're coming in from Guilers, but don't underestimate the

strength of this hill when we're coming around from the east."

Major Everett's hand draws a wide semi-circle to indicate the general direction from which the 29th Infantry Division will be pressuring Brest's external defences, and as Castiel leans over to follow his finger, he stifles a yawn with the heel of his hand.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant Novak, am I keeping you from something?" Major Campbell says coldly, from beside the S-2.

"No, sir," Castiel says. "Please, continue."

Campbell narrows his eyes at Castiel, but as ever, Castiel has ensured that his tone is nothing but politely neutral professionalism, and so there he cannot feasibly complain. It gives Castiel immense pleasure.

"We'll be coming through Recouvrance," Everett goes on. "Theoretically, we'll be sticking closer to the coast to clear out fortresses down there, but the 115th are taking on one of the heavier batteries at Montbarey in the next few days and may need our help, so it's up in the air."

Castiel studies the map, taking in the known enemy positions marked onto the paper in Everett's blue ink.

"Do we have any further intel on to the extent to which the submarine bays are being used as a base?" Lieutenant Cain asks.

"Not as of yet – I'll let you know when we do," Campbell says, and his voice is so markedly different with a respectable officer that Castiel can't resist lifting his eyes to meet Gabriel's over the map. Gabriel

looks about as unimpressed as Castiel feels.

“Are there any further questions?” Major Everett asks.

Castiel straightens. “No, sir.” It is echoed by the rest of the company commanding officers.

At the back of the room, S-1 Major Singer is slumped back against the wall, drinking slowly from his canteen. At this point, he stands. “Alright. Then here's the good news you've all been waiting for – tomorrow, twenty-one-hundred hours sharp.” Singer looks between them, his expression sympathetic but uncompromising. “You're going back on the line.”

Castiel doesn't react.

“You all need to be formed up on the parade square by the town hall by twenty-forty-five at the very latest,” Singer says. “It'll be a motor march until we get to Saint-Renan, and then you're back in the field, tactical. Don't let your time off make you lazy – we haven't captured Brest yet.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Nothing furthered. You're dismissed.”

There is the sharp, synchronised sound of the COs all coming to attention together. Castiel snaps his hand up to his brow, eyes fixed on a spot on the wall opposite.

Major Singer lazily lifts a hand in salute, throws it down. “Yeah, yeah. Get out of here.”

They turn and head out one by one. Castiel follows Lieutenant Naomi out, and once he's through the door, he drops back to walk with Gabriel.

“Boy oh boy, are you as excited as I am?” Gabriel asks drily.

Castiel's mouth pulls down. “Well, we knew we wouldn't be here forever,” he says.

“I know, I know. Still, a girl can dream, right?” Gabriel lifts a hand, fingers spread, and waves it in front of their faces as though envisioning a headline. “Hot showers every day. Cute nurses. Hell, more Uncle Spam, I don't care. I'll keep it for the showers and the nurses.”

“What nurses?”

Gabriel looks over, incredulous. “Castiel. Are you telling me you haven't gone by the aid station yet? You know, the love of your life is probably in there. The love of my life is in there for sure. Or at least the love of a weekend.” He shrugs. “Ehh. The rack on some of them, who even needs a lifelong romance?”

“Yeah,” Castiel says. “I'll be sure to go by, then.”

“You do that. Tell Helene I said hi. And if she doesn't remember me – which, by the way, she absolutely should, because hello, look at me – then just, I don't know, jog her memory. Give her some tongue, say it's

from the short and handsome--”

“Sorry, Lieutenant Novak?”

Castiel turns halfway, looking back over his shoulder, and Dean is five or so feet back. He looks hesitant. For a moment Castiel just considers him, eyes tracing slow and judgemental from his boots to his helmet. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah, sir, I was just wondering if I could talk to you about something private,” Dean says, and his eyes flick to Gabriel and back again.

“Captain Laufeyson and I were in the middle of--”

“Nah, don't worry about it,” Gabriel says, and there goes Castiel's excuse. “I was only talking shit about the nurses up at the aid station. You're a medic, you must've seen them.”

Dean grins. “Yes, I have, sir.”

Something turns uncomfortably over in Castiel's gut. “Fine, Winchester, you have my attention. What is it?”

Gabriel walks away backwards. “I'll leave you to it, then. Novak, I'll see you around, unless the brass can think of another reason to make us all miserable.”

Castiel nods to acknowledge him, and then he turns to Dean. “What?”

Dean comes to stand in front of him, and he pushes his hands deep into the pockets of his pants. “Uhh. Okay. Well, sir, I just wanted to say that I guess I'm sorry for upsetting you.”

Castiel stares at him. “So you're not really sorry.”

“What?” Dean frowns. “Yeah, I am.”

“No, you're not. The way you framed that – the blame is on me for being--” Castiel trips over his own words. He won't say *upset*. He wasn't upset. “--angry,” he finishes. He eyes Dean – it's hard to believe that Dean is apologising at all, even if he is getting it all wrong. “I think you need to try again with that apology.”

Dean lets out an irritated huff of his breath. “Look, I didn't come here for a lecture.”

“Well, you clearly you didn't come to say that you're sorry, either,” Castiel says irritably.

“You're right, because I'm not sorry,” Dean tells him, and he sounds bizarrely relaxed about that fact. “I just came to say that I didn't mean to upset you that bad, and, uh – just that if you ever wanna pick this back up, I won't do it again.”

Castiel narrows his eyes. He isn't sure he understands this correctly: Dean is not apologising for his misdoings, but he wants to start something up again with Castiel. It's confusing, to say the least.

“By the way, you, uh--” Dean hesitates. He pushes a hand into the pocket of his combat jacket, and goes no further. He looks at Castiel, as though he's looking for some kind of sign as to how to proceed, but Castiel doesn't have an answer. Dean clears his throat. “You dropped this.”

He pulls something out of his pocket, and Castiel has a moment of sheer confusion – he is so careful with his webbing, with his haversacks, everything tightly buckled and zipped to prevent this from happening – and then Dean is holding out Castiel's crucifix and dog-tags.

Castiel stares.

He remembers now. Dean pushed back against the wall of the La Trinité bunker, Castiel pressed against him and shaking apart between his hands. Yanking the crucifix off, throwing it blindly aside. Castiel swallows.

He takes it from Dean.

“Thank you,” he says stiffly. For a moment, he's thrown off, and he forgets that he's still angry at Dean – that he doesn't forgive him.

“I know it's important to you,” Dean says, and Castiel recalls now, if dimly, that he's angry, but it's getting harder to believe in it. “So... that's it. I just wanted to give that back, and say, you know, that if you want back in, I'm in, and – and if boundaries is what you need, then I'll do better.”

He is so earnest and straight-forward that Castiel is having trouble meeting his eyes. Dean isn't saying that he's sorry, but he is handsome and charming and honest and he wants to keep trying with this thing,

whatever they have, and Castiel is weak.

He looks at the crucifix curled up in his hand, and he tightens his fingers around it. He breathes in deep. He is not going to do something stupid that he'll only regret.

“Sir?” Dean says, and he tips his head down to catch Castiel's eye, and Castiel accidentally lets himself be caught. Dean's eyes are pale in the light of an overcast afternoon, and his eyelashes are golden, and his expression is gentle, hesitant.

“You need to learn to respect boundaries,” Castiel says, before he knows what he's doing.

Dean lifts his chin. “Yes, sir.”

“I mean it. You say there won't be a repeat of last time – good. If there is, this is over. Permanently.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you need to stop being so arrogant in front of the other men,” Castiel adds.

“Sir, I'm pretty sure that me not being arrogant would more of a giveaway than anything--”

“A modicum of respect would be enough, sergeant.”

“Oh, a modicum. Alright, then.”

Castiel narrows his eyes. “I'm serious,” he says, and because he is a worthless, desperate queer without an ounce of control or self-respect, he doesn't stop there. ““I'm going to put you on latrine duty in the second battalion enlisted barracks tonight,” he tells him. “Your assignment will start at eighteen-thirty hours, and I will be there shortly after for a full inspection of the facilities.”

Dean's mouth cracks into a grin. “Oh yeah? Is that what we're calling it now?”

Castiel fights the urge to roll his eyes; he settles instead for giving him a withering look. “Eighteen-thirty hours. Is that clear?”

“Clear, sir.” Dean straightens, his heels clicking together, and he snaps off a salute that Castiel is absolutely certain has some mocking element to it, but he can't fault him. It seems Castiel's quest for diminished cockiness in Dean is for nothing.

Castiel comes to attention and salutes him, and even once he's brought his hand down, Dean stays a moment longer, grinning, before he lowers his salute and heads off to go. Castiel stays straight-spined, watching him go, and then Inias is coming out of the town hall on the far side of the road and jogging over.

“Hey – lunch?” Inias asks, slowing.

“You can call me Castiel.”

“Oh, he's a comedian!” Inias says, and he bumps Castiel with his shoulder. “Come on. I'm starving.”

Castiel walks with him, quiet.

Inias looks over. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah.” Castiel can't help himself; he glances over his shoulder at Dean's retreating back.

Inias follows his eyes. “Oh.” He pauses, then, says cheerfully, “He okay?”

Castiel looks at him, surprised. Inias is trying to be better, he realises. He's showing an interest, the way he never did before. “He's fine,” he says, after a beat. Then: “He was just – apologising.”

“For what?”

Castiel hesitates again. He doesn't know how much to say. “We – disagreed. At La Trinité.”

“Okay. His fault?”

Castiel looks straight ahead as they walk. He opens his mouth, closes it again. “Yes,” he says, finally. It doesn't feel entirely true.

Inias pulls a face. “Goddamnit, Winchester. So what'd he say?”

In spite of everything, the awkwardness, all of it, Castiel is glad of this. He doesn't like to talk about his feelings, but not talking at all is worse, and those four days of no communication between them was driving him slightly insane. “He apologised for angering me,” Castiel says.

“By which you mean he didn't apologise.”

“Inias, he--”

“Cas, you're an ugly piece of shit. But I'm sorry about that, I really am.”

Castiel shoots him a scowl, but Inias just raises his eyebrows, and after a moment, Castiel realises what Inias is saying. “It wasn't like that.”

“So how was it like?” Inias asks.

Castiel still has his crucifix and dog-tags tangled up together in his fist. He clenches his hard tighter to feel the cold bite of metal into his skin, and then he slips it into the pocket of his combat pants. “Not like that,” he says again, and then pushes to change the conversation. “How are you doing?”

“Oh, you know. Can't complain,” Inias says, in the voice of a man distinctly in love with complaining. “I had two-platoon on close-order drills this morning, and Jesus, you'd think I was yanking their fingernails off one by one.”

Castiel smiles.

They come to the food truck and join the back of the queue. Castiel automatically goes to his webbing and fumbles uselessly at his own waist before he realises he isn't wearing it. “I don't have my mug,” he says.

“Damn. Look, I'm sure someone can lend you one when they're done.” Inias cups a hand over his mouth and calls, “Anyone got a spare mug for our fearless commander?”

Private Rosen lifts his hand. “I just finished, sir. I haven't washed it out yet, though.”

“That's fine,” Castiel says, and leaves the queue to cross to Rosen. “More for me.”

Rosen grins and hands it over. Castiel heads back to Inias, only to find that a few more men have joined the queue, and he dutifully heads to the back – or at leas,t he tries to, but Inias snags his sleeve and drags him back into his original position.

“Goddamn honourable gentleman, I swear to God,” Inias grumbles. “Use your perks!”

“What perks?” Castiel says, and he casts an apologetic look over his shoulder at the men behind him.

“You know – commanding privileges. Food, drink, women...” Inias grimaces. “Food and drink, at least.”

Castiel squints at him disapprovingly.

The line moves up, and Inias holds his metal canteen mug out. Castiel follows suit, mumbles a thank you, and then he and Inias move along out of the way with their hot food – some combination of potatoes and spam, like every other day, but it beats cold rations and Castiel is grateful for it.

Lieutenants Hester and Virgil come over to eat with them, and it turns out that Virgil comes bearing good news – he's got the letter saying his wife's given birth at last, and he's now the proud father of a baby girl with brown eyes – and Hester tells a joke that is almost funny, and Castiel feels close to content.

Afterwards, Inias has a job to do, his platoon waiting for him, and so Castiel washes out Rosen's mug, returns it, and gets back to business.

He supervises four-platoon on extended-order drills, goes by three-platoon on their weapons cleaning session to check rifles at random to ensure they're up to standard; he leads a lesson on map-reading and navigation with his platoon leaders and NCOs to be sure that everyone is up to scratch on their essential skills. There is an inspection of company barracks at seventeen-hundred hours, and he makes a list of those with faulty equipment.

He goes by the medical station for an update on his injured men, so that he can plan his company formation based around whether certain wounded soldiers will be returning to the front line when they move out or if they'll have to stay in the aid station a while longer. He strips down and cleans his own rifle. He counts the seconds until eighteen-thirty, and then he waits a little longer, to give Dean time to get there first, and then he walks over.

As he walks, Castiel runs over the battalion's plan for the night, checking and double-checking that he has calculated this correctly and that there won't be any disturbances.

Baker is practising snap ambush drills in the fields just south of the village; Able is out doing calisthenics, and will be until nineteen-hundred hours; Charlie and Dog are in recap lessons. The other companies are stationed in another barracks, and have no reason to come this way.

Everything should be fine.

Castiel takes a deep breath. He palms his helmet off his head, and runs a hand through one side of his hair. He straightens the front of his combat jacket. Flattens his collar. He thinks, idly, that he should have shaved this morning, and that's when he realises that he's nervous – and when the fuck did that happen?

Dean and Castiel have done this often enough now that it should be common-place, and yet somehow it's as stressful as it's ever been, and not least because there is some weak part of Castiel that worries that Dean will find him unsatisfactory. Selfishly, Castiel wants to be the best Dean's ever had, although he knows that's improbable at best. He wants to be all Dean thinks about. He wants this to mean something – whatever that means – and then Castiel pushes the door to the latrine open, and there Dean is.

Castiel closes the door behind him.

Dean stands awkwardly in the middle of the room, his hands in the pockets of his pants, and he looks up when Castiel comes in. He looks happy to see Castiel, and the idea of that is heavier than Castiel knows how to handle.

“Sergeant,” Castiel says by way of greeting, and he sets his helmet down just to the side of the door. That nervousness is still skittering all through him, and he feels unsure of himself.

Dean nods. “Lieutenant.” He inhales through his teeth, chest inflating exaggeratedly, and he glances around. “So are the, uh – facilities – to your standards, sir?”

“Winchester, shut the fuck up,” Castiel says, and he crosses the space between them in three steps. He slips one hand around to cup the back of Dean's neck and pull his head down, and he crushes their mouths together without pre-amble. He opens his mouth over Dean's, licks heatedly inside, and his other hand slips down between their bodies to push up underneath Dean's combat jacket and find his belt.

Dean lets out his breath in a burst, but he doesn't hesitate. He gets his hands up to unzip his combat jacket, wrestling his arms free as Castiel yanks Dean's belt open and goes for the button and fly of his pants, and all the while he doesn't let up kissing Castiel. His mouth is hot and urgent, teeth and tongue, and he captures Castiel's bottom lip.

Castiel takes hold of Dean's hips and pushes him backwards, away from the door, until Dean's back bumps the side wall of the latrine – all the while with his mouth relentless on Dean's, kissing him fast and hard until Dean is breathless. Castiel unzips Dean's pants, shoves his hand down past underwear and all, and drags his palm up over Dean's cock where he is half-hard. Dean exhales roughly, his breath hot on Castiel's face, and his hips jerk unconsciously forwards.

Castiel presses his hand down again and he drinks in the tiny noises that Dean makes, the way he holds his breath instead of letting out a groan or a sigh. Dean rocks his hips slowly against Castiel's hand, his cock filling, and all Castiel can think is how he's been desperate for Dean all week. Every time he looks at him, with his long legs, with the

close fit of his T-shirt to his stomach and hips whenever he takes off his combat jacket, all Castiel can think of is his cock, the way it would feel on his tongue. The taste of it.

Dean's mouth is spit-slick, his tongue sliding hot over Castiel's, and his hands are on Castiel's face – holding his jaw still as he kisses him roughly, hard enough that his lips sting. Castiel palms over Dean's cock, smothers the small gasp that Dean makes. Then he pulls his hand out of Dean's pants, and instead slides it up over Dean's chest to slip his suspenders down over his shoulders. He shimmies Dean's pants and underwear both down past his thighs.

Castiel drops to his knees.

Above him, Castiel sees Dean's mouth fall open, but whatever he wants to say, he doesn't – they're in a busy building, with people walking past the other side of a very thin door. Dean lets out a shaky breath, and he holds still while Castiel rubs his palms up along Dean's freckled thighs.

Castiel lifts his eyes to meet Dean's, eyebrows slightly raised, and then he leans in, closes his mouth over Dean's cock.

Dean's breath hitches again, and Castiel can see the effort to hold still in his clenched fists where they press against the wall at Dean's back. Castiel drags his tongue over the underside of Dean's cock, lets it catch under the head, and Dean's hips pulse forwards again. Castiel puts one hand on Dean's bare hip to steady him, and he starts to move.

Castiel hasn't had a lot of practice, but he knows what feels good with his hand, and he remembers some of what Dean had done to him before that made him feel as though he was losing his mind. He uses his hand at the base of Dean's cock, and he tightens his lips until they feel numb, and he pushes himself to take as much as he can. He

hollows his cheeks to hear Dean gasp above him; he pulls off to lick over the head of Dean's cock, and suddenly Dean's hands are in his hair.

Dean's grip is tight to the point of near-pain, Castiel's too-long hair tangled between his fingers, but the sting of it almost feels good. Mouth wet, Castiel sinks back onto Dean's cock, and Dean's hands are steady on the back of Castiel's head, with just enough pressure to indicate to Castiel to keep going – and Castiel couldn't even dream of refusing.

He's on his knees in a public bathroom, sucking his senior medic's dick – he's past the point of no return already, and he wants so badly to push Dean over the edge like this, so what does it matter if Dean is holding his head still, while Dean's hips move incrementally faster to fuck into Castiel's mouth? He wants Dean to. He wants Dean to shake apart under his hands and his lips. He wants Dean to come in his mouth and make that soft, muffled noise he does, the one that sounds like it's pulled out from deep within his chest. Castiel wants to be hoarse for the next three hours.

Castiel sucks him hard, and he brushes his thumb down from the base of Dean's cock over his balls, and Dean is shaky above him. His thighs tremble, and Castiel can hear him struggle to keep breathing evenly; his chest is heaving, and his hands clench and unclench in Castiel's hair. His hips are rolling steadily now, and then less steadily, snapping forwards to thrust into Castiel's mouth.

There is the low beginnings of a moan in Dean's mouth every time he inhales, and Castiel can see the muscles of his stomach twitch and jump. Castiel wants to touch him; he wants to skate his hands up over Dean's abdomen and chest, to scratch down his sides and back. He wants to know Dean's body better than he knows his own. He wants to lick and kiss and suck marks everywhere he can, and Castiel is so painfully hard that just the thought of it sends new heat searing up through his gut – but for now, he is busy.

Dean is shaking, his hips moving without rhythm now as he gets close, and his hands tighten in Castiel's hair to the point that Castiel's eyes water. Dean stifles a high, desperate noise between lips clamped tight, and then he gasps, and he comes down Castiel's throat, and then there is the sound of loud voices outside the door.

Castiel has Dean's cock in his mouth, come spilling over his bottom lip where he chokes a little and can't swallow it all, and the latrine door creaks as it is pushed open.

Castiel freezes.

Dean's hand clenches in Castiel's hair, and his thighs tense visibly with panic.

“--told him that wasn't gonna happen, and I swear to God, he wanted to start a fight about it. Yeah, I know – he was coming up close and acting all tough, even though I swear he's eighty pounds--”

Castiel would be relieved that he had the foresight to push Dean across to the wall, where they are out of sight from the door, but he's currently too busy holding his breath in absolute terror.

“Hey, hey, I think this one's out of order.”

“Huh? Since when?”

“I don't know, I just remember hearing something about it in the brief – it's either out of order or it's being cleaned, I don't remember exactly.”

“Who gives a shit? It's just a fucking latrine, for Christ's sake.”

Castiel's fingernails are digging into Dean's thigh.

There is a third voice, groaning complaint. “Come on, we're gonna be late – we were supposed to be there two minutes ago. Can you not just hold it in?”

“It's your funeral if I piss myself.”

“Yeah, yeah, let's just get a goddamn--” The door creaks shut, and the voices dwindle away.

Dean is softening in Castiel's mouth, and when Castiel looks up, Dean is wide-eyed and horrified.

“Fuck,” Dean whispers. He tips his head back to rest against the wall, and he starts to shake with silent laughter. “Oh my god. Fuck. Jesus, fuck.”

Castiel sits back on his heels, and lets out all his pent-up breath as he tries to process that they weren't caught. They are still getting away with it. He wipes the back of his hand over his mouth, scrubbing away the stray mess of Dean's come with his knuckle. He doesn't say anything.

Dean tucks himself back into his underwear and pulls his combat pants up, fumbling with the belt buckle, and then he drops to kneel in front of Castiel.

“Everything okay down here, sir?” he says. He tilts his head over to catch Castiel's eyes.

Castiel looks at him reluctantly, and he wants to say something, but he doesn't know what. He's tired of pushing Dean away because it's wrong and it's bad and they shouldn't. He knows full well that they'll both lose their jobs if they're discovered, or worse, but he is just so tired of worrying about it.

Then Dean surprises him . He leans forwards and kisses him.

Castiel's eyebrows lift – he knows that Dean isn't like him, that Dean hates having come in his mouth, and yet here Dean is kissing him when Castiel's tongue still tastes of it. However, he isn't going to complain, because he's still mostly hard in his combat pants and he still aches for Dean to touch him, so he lets Dean kiss him, languid and open-mouthed.

“We're fine, sir,” Dean says against Castiel's lips, gentle. “We're fine. They didn't come in.”

Castiel doesn't care that they narrowly evaded discovery again. He still has the panic and shame in the pit of his gut, and he wants Dean to do terrible things to him until it all goes away, and most of all, he wants Dean to shut up.

He straightens up to better kiss Dean, pressing hard against his mouth to put an end to this gentle, romantic nonsense, and he bites at his bottom lip until Dean gasps out loud. Dean goes for Castiel's belt-buckle, and even Dean's fumbling to get his pants undone is enough that Castiel's cock twitches heavily against his thigh.

Dean slips one arm through his fallen suspenders to keep his pants up, leaving the other at his side, and the other hand unzips Castiel and pushes down past his underwear. His hand is cold, and Castiel flinches, hissing against Dean's mouth, but then Dean's thumb is dragging slowly up the underside of Castiel's cock and he forgets to be annoyed.

Castiel tilts his hips unconsciously towards Dean to give him better access, and he ignores the fact that he can already feel his knees starting to ache from the hard tile. He pushes his tongue into Dean's mouth, kisses him with lazy heat, and Dean wraps his hand around Castiel's cock, jerks him once, slow. Castiel's breath snags.

He settles his hands loose on Dean's waist as Dean's hand moves slowly, and then Dean yanks his hand out, pulls back from Castiel just far enough to spit into his palm, and when he brings his hand back down to Castiel's cock, he picks up the pace.

The difference is incredible, and Castiel kisses Dean harder in an attempt to smother any incriminating noise against Dean's mouth, because the pressure is hot and perfect, and every shift of Dean's hand – when he tightens his fingers, the way his thumb bumps under the head of Castiel's cock as he jerks him – has Castiel hitching these tiny gasps. His chest is heavy as fire builds in his belly, sparking at the base of his spine.

Then, as Castiel breaks away to pant against the corner of Dean's mouth, Dean tilts his head over, and suddenly Dean's mouth is at Castiel's jaw instead, dragging hot and wet to press open-mouthed kisses down the line of his throat. Something about it has Castiel trembling, his hands on Dean's hips, fingers tight in the fabric of his T-shirt, and he wants, he wants. Dean's hand is unrelenting on Castiel's cock, and his tongue curls over Castiel's collarbone, and Castiel thinks he's losing his mind.

He tips his head back, giving Dean more room. He lets his eyes flutter

closed. As though from far away, he hears himself make this faint, choked out sound as Dean's thumb swirls over the tip of his cock, and Dean bites at the slope of Castiel's shoulder. He drags his lips along Castiel's clavicle, up his throat again to lick over his Adam's apple, and all the air in Castiel's lungs shakes out in one unsteady burst.

Castiel can feel his hips moving restlessly – not with any real force, awkward as it is as they both kneel on the floor – and he tries to keep his breathing even, but Dean's mouth is hot underneath his jaw, and he's touching him with urgency now. Castiel is fucking into his fist, head tipped back to pant as his thighs tense, and the heat of it all underneath his skin and in the pit of the stomach is almost overwhelming. He's so close it hurts, and he wants Dean's hands on him properly. He wants Dean's fingers inside him, and the blunt scrape of Dean's rough hands all over his back and sides and chest, inside his thighs, and he presses his lips tight together to try and keep quiet.

There is some low, desperate whine in the back of his throat that turns into a gasp, and Castiel tucks his tongue behind his teeth to force himself to keep quiet, and then Dean's hand tightens, and Castiel comes.

His eyes close and he fights to catch his breath as he comes down. He can hear Dean shifting in front of him, and then the creak of Dean's boots as he stands up, the rustle as he adjusts his clothes.

Castiel inhales through his nose to steady himself. He clears his throat. He organises his clothes – zipping his pants up, tucking his shirt back in, snapping his belt-buckle closed – and then there is Dean's hand held out in front of him.

Castiel eyes the outstretched hand with suspicion, and looks at Dean.

“I know what you're thinking, and no, that's this one,” Dean says, and he offers his other hand for Castiel to see, which is splattered with come.

Castiel wants to refuse, but he can't think of a grounds on which to do it, and his knees ache on the latrine tile. He takes Dean's hand and lets Dean pull him onto his feet.

“Thanks,” Castiel mutters, and he avoids Dean's eyes. He is standing too close to him, and he is doing his best not to be caught up in the tall, solid breadth of him, the one suspender loop still hanging at his side, his crumpled shirt.

He pulls his hand from Dean's and turns, crossing the room to the sink. He washes his hands slowly, with diligence, and Dean comes to settle beside him at the next faucet over. There is a silence stretched between them, but it feels different from usual somehow.

Normally, their encounters follow a kind of routine – they finish with each other, and then Dean tries to spark up conversation between them, some kind of common ground, and then Castiel pulls away. Dean isn't saying anything, but he is right beside Castiel, and for the first time, Castiel doesn't want to leave without saying something.

He hesitates, still slowly wringing his hands under the water. “Winchester,” he says, and then he can't get further.

Dean lifts his head, looks over. He waits.

With his eyes on the faucet, Castiel takes a deep breath. “I just – thank you.”

Dean's mouth lifts in a smile, and then, teasing, he says, “What – for cleaning the latrines?”

Castiel realises that Dean is offering him a way out, in case all this is too much, and Castiel is hit with a rush of gratitude, warm in his chest, that almost startles him. It is perhaps that gratitude, bordering on affection, that makes him feel he doesn't need to take Dean's way out. “No,” he says. “For--”

He stops. They're in a room with thin walls, in a building full of army men who would crucify them if they knew, and he doesn't know if he could bring himself to address what they've done directly even if circumstances were different. He looks up at Dean.

“For everything,” he finishes.

Dean doesn't answer straight away. He looks evenly at Castiel, his expression somewhere near thoughtful. He has the beginnings of a smile on his mouth. “That's alright, sir,” he says. “No problem.”

Castiel shuts off the faucet, and he shakes the water off his hands. Beside him, Dean wipes his hands on the back of his combat pants.

“You still need to clean these latrines, you know,” Castiel says, turning to him.

Dean scrunches up his nose with distaste. “Yes, sir.”

“You don't need to report to me when you're done. Get on to dinner and then be ready for the 2nd Battalion medical officers' briefing at twenty-one-hundred hours.”

“Yes, sir.”

Castiel gives a curt nod, having nothing further to say, and then the strangest urge comes over him, and he only realises that he is about to do something stupid like kiss Dean's cheek when he catches himself leaning forwards into his space. He catches himself, freezes up with mere inches between them, and he has Dean's eyes on him, wide and confused. His heart is thundering.

He pulls back sharply. He swallows. “That'll be all, sergeant,” he says, and his voice is strained. He is still too close to Dean.

“Yes, sir,” Dean says, quiet.

Castiel steps back, and something in him is disoriented, because he comes to attention, tilts his chin up – as though he's waiting to be saluted.

For a moment, Dean only stares at him, bewildered, but eventually, he does lift his hand to his brow, slowly, with a frown. Castiel snaps his hand up, straight back down, and then he turns on his heel to head out. Christ, he's a fucking idiot. He doesn't know what's wrong with him. He doesn't know why his pulse is hammering through his skull like he's run five miles, and he has this dry ache in his throat, and he doesn't know what to do with his hands.

Castiel pushes his hands into the pockets of his combat pants, and his fingers bump cold metal. He touches the hard lines of his crucifix, twists the chain around his thumb.

12th September, 1944

Oh-four-sixteen hours. Castiel stares up at the ceiling of his barracks, hands folded over his stomach on top of his thin blanket. He isn't even trying to sleep anymore; he's long since given up on that.

He keeps waking up in the middle of the night, sweat damp and slightly spooked, and by the time he is conscious, he can't even remember what it was that so startled him in the first place. It doesn't happen every night, but often enough that Castiel is getting sick of it.

He climbs out of bed, pulls on his combats and his boots; he slings his rifle over his shoulder and he heads out to go running. It's becoming something of a habit, while they're stationed here, off the front line. It fills time, and it keeps him in good shape for when they get back out there – and if he exhausts himself in the day time, it's easier to sleep at night.

Truth be told, Castiel is having a hard time adapting to actually sleeping at night. In the field, he scarcely had time for more than three or four hours of sleep a night on good days, and on bad days, he didn't sleep at all. It's not that he likes existing on the bare minimum of sleep, but he'd become accustomed to it, and now he feels like he doesn't know what to do with the rest of the hours between midnight and morning.

Castiel knots the sleeves of his combat jacket around his waist as he descends the steps into the street, and he looks down the road out of the village at where the trees are still shrouded with early mist and darkness. Everything is cast in greys, chill and bleak, and with the exception of the soldiers on sentry at either end of the village, there is no-one else in sight.

He rolls his shoulders back until they crack, and he starts to run.

He follows the same route as last time – an approximate two-mile loop east of the village, coming back through the main intersection, and then another similar loop the other side, bringing him back again past the food truck for breakfast.

Castiel tries not to think too much as he runs. He keeps his eyes on the route ahead, and he zones out everything except from the steady beat of his footsteps, the road winding away through the hedgerows. He breathes slowly. There are puddles underfoot, and the sky is beginning to lighten at the edges into something pink and smoky.

He gets around the first two-mile loop without interruption, but as he comes around the corner to cut the intersection, Castiel catches sight of a familiar, broad-shouldered figure on the far side of the road, and he slows.

“You can't be serious, sir,” Dean says.

Castiel comes to a halt. His breathing is slightly laboured – he's only gone a few miles, but he's not in as good shape as he used to be – but he still takes a moment to inhale deeply before he speaks. “What?”

“You. Running. On our goddamn days off.”

“I like running,” Castiel objects.

Dean raises his eyebrows. “Case in point. Nobody likes running,”

Castiel considers this. “People who are good at running like running.”

Dean lets out an incredulous laugh, and he starts to cross the road towards Castiel. “Sir, you saying I'm not good at running?” he says, and it sounds like a challenge.

Castiel glances over his shoulder at the road he's come down, and he squints. “No – but I am saying that you've got a hell of a way to catch up if you want to prove me wrong.”

Dean's face splits slowly into a grin. “You got about an hour's head-start on me, sir, I'll never catch up.”

“Catch up or keep up,” Castiel says, and he sets off running fast.

There is the sound of laughter again behind him, but it fades as Castiel runs, and then it is gone.

He is only slightly disappointed – he knew Dean didn't like to run, so why would he? Of course, Castiel had been goading him, and he would have thought Dean more competitive than that.

Then, as he skirts a heap of brick rubble and a small crater in the road, there are quick footsteps behind him, faster and faster, and then Dean zips past.

Castiel doesn't smile. He doesn't. His mouth lifts and he gets this sweep of dizzying warmth all through his body, but he doesn't smile. “What took you so long?”

“Had to stretch first, sir,” Dean calls back over his shoulder. “Don't want to pull something, do I?”

Castiel rolls his eyes.

Dean runs fast, and as the sun inches its way over the horizon, the light is warm and orange on him, catching in his hair, on his arms where the sleeves of his combat jacket are pushed up. They take a curving route through the country, following the road as the hedgerows rise on either side of them, and for the first time in all Castiel's morning excursions, he isn't thinking of the ways the trees splinter under gunfire and mortars, or of bodies sliding down the embankment with bloody mouths. He is caught up in the way Dean moves, the steady way he places his feet, the shift of muscle under his clothes. His skin in the light.

In all honesty, Dean is faster than Castiel had anticipated, and it's beginning to bug him – not least because Castiel issued a specific challenge that Dean is neglecting in favour of some other challenge he's thought of, and Castiel is not happy with the idea of Dean showing him up.

“You know this isn't a race, don't you?” Castiel calls ahead to Dean.

From five feet in front, Dean laughs. “Isn't it?”

“Long-distance running is a test of stamina, not speed, Winchester--”

“Well you already know I got good stamina, so--”

Castiel flushes hot. “Shut the hell up.”

“Sorry, sir, I can't hear you – I think I'm too far ahead?” Dean shouts over his shoulder.

“I said, shut--”

“Can't hear you! Tell me later when you catch up—”

Right. Castiel cannot possibly be slower than Dean, who is taller than him, heavier, and less athletic – for Christ's sake, he doesn't even like running – and so even though this is a test of long-distance endurance and Castiel doesn't like to sprint, he has a point to prove. He pushes himself faster and faster, stretches his legs out longer, and he's level with Dean in moments. Dean starts laughing, and then he's sprinting as well.

The road bends ahead of them in a long curve, the trees either side leaning in and dappling the sunlight where it is blending orange into the heavy grey cloud cover, casting purple shadows that snag in the hollow of Dean's throat, under the line of his jaw. Their feet are thundering, and Castiel breathes through his teeth – he can't sustain this - and he keeps the speed up, forcing himself faster until his legs ache and his feet feel overdue for stumbling. Dean's legs are longer, but Castiel is faster, he's more stubborn, and he really does not like the idea of Dean gloating his victory.

Up ahead, the road twists away on towards Plouzané, so they're due to turn east now in order to start the loop back towards battalion. Castiel veers sideways to where there is a farm-gate half open – only room for one person to fit through at a time – and he is jostling shoulder-to-shoulder with Dean.

“Get out of the way, Winchester, we can't both--”

“Sorry, sir, but I'm taking this one, you're not gonna--”

Dean is pulling in front, and Castiel doesn't have time to get in front of him before he'll hit the fence, so he cheats – and he's not proud of it, but he is privately somewhat pleased with himself when Dean stalls mid-step as Castiel reaches over to grab a handful of his jacket. Castiel yanks him in as though he's going to say something, or maybe as though to kiss him, and then, in the moment where Dean is startled, Castiel pushes in front of him and takes off fast.

“You fuckin' asshole, sir!” Dean yells as he crashes into the fence.

“Sorry, Winchester, I can't hear you,” Castiel yells over his shoulder. “I think I'm too far--”

He's too busy looking back at Dean – he doesn't notice the tree-root that curls up in front of him. His foot catches and he trips, and he doesn't quite land flat on his face, but close enough. He goes sprawling onto his hands and knees, pain spiralling up through one wrist and into his bad shoulder, and in the meantime, Dean catches up, cackling like a maniac.

“Well, shit, sir, you sure showed me,” Dean says, but he's breathing heavily and leaning on his knees as he speaks, and Castiel isn't too out of breath, so Castiel privately considers this a victory, even if he did humiliate himself.

Dean holds out a hand. Castiel takes it and uses the grip to haul himself back upright – but then Dean doesn't let go.

He squeezes Castiel's hand. “Truce?”

Castiel looks at him levelly. “Absolutely not.”

“What? You fucking fell over--”

“But I won,” Castiel says.

Dean shakes his head. “Bullshit did you win. Bullshit. You practically fell on your goddamn ass, sir--”

“I don't remember saying that falling down was a disqualifier,” Castiel points out. “All I remember is that I was in front of you – by a long margin, I might add – and then you called for a truce.”

Dean becomes ever more incredulous, but his face is set in a wide grin that crinkles the corners of his eyes. He has the light of the early morning behind him, clouds dove-grey and yellow, peachy at the edges, and it makes him look soft. “You were only in front of me because you fucking cheated.”

“I disagree.”

“You can't disagree – you literally pushed me out of the face to get through that gate--”

Castiel tips his head over. “That's not how I remember it,” he says, and it's a lie, but he has this lightness in his chest, and he thinks he might even be smiling. Dean still has his fingers wrapped around Castiel's wrist.

“You didn't win.”

“I think you need to accept that I might have won,” Castiel tells him.

“You didn't,” Dean exclaims, and then, in his most patronising voice, goes on: “And anyway, it doesn't matter whether you won or not, asshole. It's not a race, right, it's a test of stamina—”

Castiel is caught off-guard, and so he does something he hasn't done in a long time. He bursts out with a laugh. “Oh, is it?”

“It's not a race,” Dean says again, smiling wide as the sky overhead, and he goes on, “and respectfully, sir, I think you might be a little too competitive, 'cause you're making up all this bullshit about how you won and I lost when, honestly, it wasn't even a—”

Castiel kisses him.

He doesn't think about it, or what it means. He doesn't do it because he wants to fuck Dean, here, in the open, on a half-tilled patch of farmland with the unfolding sunlight above, nor to shut him up, or put him in his place. In all honesty, Castiel has no idea why he does it, but he holds Dean still with one hand curled into the front of his jacket, and he catches his mouth.

Dean is tall and solid, and he touches one very hesitant hand to Castiel's hip. When he kisses back, his mouth is the gentlest it's ever been, and for just a few seconds, Castiel pretends that this is something they can do. He pretends, and he appreciates the soft press of Dean's lips, and when he pulls back just far enough to breathe, he keeps his eyes closed a couple of moments longer.

“Uhh,” Dean says. There is his hand, still, light and tentative at Castiel's side. “What was that for?”

Castiel exhales through his nose. He leans back, tips his head down into his chest. “I don't know.”

“Sir--”

“Forgive me,” Castiel says, quiet, and he lifts his face to meet Dean's eyes, and that's when Dean uses two fingers underneath Castiel's jaw to gently tilt his chin up, and he moves in to kiss him again. Dean's other hand settles lightly against the side of Castiel's neck, and Castiel stands there with a handful of Dean's shirt, and he does his best not to over-think it.

Castiel holds onto that kiss for the rest of the day. On the run back, he sneaks glances at Dean when he's not looking; he lets Dean poke fun at him as they sprint the last half-mile, and he tolerates Dean gloating that he won. He holds onto it as he plans to take Baker Company back into the field, and while he knows that it doesn't mean anything, it makes the preparations to go back onto the front line seem less bleak. He thinks of Dean's careful hands and mouth in every idle moment, and there's nothing wrong with that.

Castiel is on his way from his barracks to battalion CP, a map in hand, when Private Yen comes jogging up to fall into step with him. “Lieutenant Novak, sir, do you know which way to Dog Company CP, sir?” he asks.

Castiel points. “Second left and then bear right until the church. The command post should be inside.”

Yen lets out a long breath of relief. “Shit, sir, you've saved my life.

Thanks.” He waves a hand as he takes off jogging again, down in the direction Castiel has indicated.

Castiel doesn't mind – since they only have a few hours left here before they move out, it's understandable that there's a lot of chaos and confusion, and he'd rather make sure that everyone is happy and knows what they're doing than have that free time to himself. He checks over his map again as he walks, and then there is Ash Lowell approaching with a smile.

“Hi, sir, you got a minute?” Ash asks.

Castiel folds away the map in his hands and tucks it into the breast pocket of his combat jacket. If he's having some kind of impromptu session of open discussion with the company, then at least he should be paying attention. “Sure. How can I help?”

“I was sent over to give you this,” Ash says, and he holds out a crumpled piece of paper. “That's the First Sergeant's action report on the patrol last night, but he's off doing something for battalion mess. God knows what. And this,” he hands over an envelope, “is for you.”

Castiel takes the envelope, turns it over in his hands. It's addressed from Hannah Novak.

Silently, Castiel counts in his head. He's been in France for four months, and this is the first letter he has received from home – and his extended family weren't terribly communicative while he was in England, either.

“Thank you, corporal,” Castiel says, eventually. He looks up at Ash, who is still hovering.

“Also, I'm wondering whether you knew anything about the rumours been going around about how we're headed back to England after Brest,” Ash says.

Castiel raises his eyebrows. “It's new to me,” he says. “Your intelligence must be superior to mine.”

Ash laughs. “Nah, must be nonsense, then. Shit, sir, the replacements had me all excited for no reason.”

“If it's true, I've heard nothing about it. I'm not ruling it out, but it seems unlikely.”

Ash lets out a long, dramatic groan. “Alright, sir. Sorry to have taken up your time. I'll get out of your way.”

Castiel waits until he has turned away to retrieve the letter from his pocket.

Dearest Castiel,

I hope that this finds you in good health. I hadn't realised you would be in Europe so long. Are you doing well over there?

I'm afraid I should get right to business. My father has recommended I write to you about the matter of your mother's house. We understand, of course, that it's your home and where all your worldly possessions are, but we also understand that you're not currently paying for it. I know that you've been at war, which is terrible, and that she passed away while you

were training in West Virginia, so you have not had time to organise her affairs, but the facts are that it has been empty for a long time, and it is costing your uncle a great deal of money every year. We would like to sort something out. Please let us know as soon as possible whether you'd be happy for us to sell the house without you, or whether you will pay for it.

When you come back from war, I do hope you'll come and visit us in Bismarck – we've missed you for so long. Take care of yourself in Germany, and we'll--

"Everything alright, Castiel?"

Castiel startles. He looks up to see Lieutenant Hester in front of him, and he folds his letter away. "Yes, thank you."

"Good. I want to ask about patrol formation tonight," Hester says. "I understand that three-platoon is leading the company tonight when we move out and I'm not sure whether we should be taking staggered formation down the roads as we have been in the past when passing hedgerows should no longer be a problem, and we could cut through fields."

Castiel considers it. "The fields could be mined."

"So could the roads. Essentially, we can take the next five years getting back towards Plouzané or we could be there within a few days."

"We're not trying to get anywhere quickly," Castiel points out. "It's a fighting patrol, Hester. The intention is to clear out the rest of Le Conquet on our way, not to simply get from A to B."

Hester's expression sours. “So you want us to stick with our original patrol formation?”

Castiel resists the urge to make some comment about how the absence of new orders generally denotes that orders have not changed. He nods. “That's correct.”

“Alright.”

“Sir? Lieutenant Novak?”

Castiel turns to follow the voice behind him and finds Benji Rosen, pale-faced and looking strained. “Private Rosen,” he says. “Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, fine, sir. Fine. Only--” Rosen hesitates, and he glances past Castiel at Hester.

Castiel turns. “Is there anything else I can help you with, Lieutenant?”

Previously Castiel would not have thought it possible for Hester to look more displeased; he's wrong. Hester mutters *no, sir, that's all, sir,* and walks away. Castiel turns back to Rosen. “Does that help?”

Rosen tries for a smile. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I was – I'm hoping you won't think any less of me, sir, only I was wondering if there was any chance I could get transferred.”

Castiel blinks, alarmed. “Transferred? Is there a problem within the

company?" If there's some kind of dissent within baker that Castiel has neglected to see, then Major Singer will have his ass – not to mention the company as cohesive unit will fall apart.

"No, sir, it's just--" Rosen takes a deep breath. "Sir, I can't go back out there. I can't do that."

Castiel looks at him, and he doesn't know what to say. Selfishly, there is a part of him that wants to snap and say that Rosen needs to pull his pants up and fucking get on with it, because he has it easy, and he should try running the company for a day – but he doesn't. Instead, he says, "I'm afraid that's not possible."

Rosen's face crumples. "Sir, if I could just--"

Guilt twists in Castiel's gut, but he fights it down. "I'm sorry, Rosen. No-one likes being in the field, but if I transfer out every man who didn't like fighting, we'd have an army in administration and nobody out there liberating Europe."

"Yes, sir." Rosen's head drops.

Castiel knows that a lot of the replacements are draftees who would rather be anywhere but here, but there isn't anything he can do about that. He could give them the speech about the honour of serving their country, of the importance of freedom, but his heart isn't in it anymore. He's not sure that what they're doing is so honourable after all, but rules are rules.

"We've nearly taken Brest," Castiel tells him. "We shouldn't be on the front line for too long this time."

Rosen doesn't look convinced. “I just – feel like I'm the only one who wants to go home,” he says, and Castiel feels dread crawl the length of his spine. Rosen wants to talk about his feelings. This isn't Castiel's mandate – this is something that the First Sergeant deals with, or platoon leaders, not the company commanding officer. Rosen looks up at him. “Sir, do you never get this? Do you never feel... jeez, I don't know. Afraid?”

Castiel stares at him, face carefully blank. Inias would tell him to humanise himself, to try empathy to make the kid feel better – but the pin heavy on Castiel's collar is telling not to undermine his own authority. “No,” he says. “Never.”

“Right. Sorry, sir.”

Castiel feels worse than ever. There is an ache in his chest and he wants to say, *I hate it here but it's the only place I feel useful, needed. I never wanted to be in charge. I wanted to be a good dutiful footsoldier like you.* He lifts his head. “Will that be all, Private?”

“Yes, sir,” Rosen says hurriedly. “Sorry to have bothered you, sir.” He performs an awkward almost-bow before he heads away down the road, and as he goes, Castiel spots Inias hovering ten feet back or so.

Inias watches Rosen go past, and then catches Castiel's eye with raised eyebrows. He comes over. “What was that about?”

Castiel checks his watch – he still needs to meet with Major Campbell before dinner, and he needs to go over equipment on parade tonight before they move out. He doesn't know if he'll have time for it all. He really shouldn't have let so many people come up to him with questions; he should have dismissed them and moved on, the way any decent officer would have done. “Rosen wanted to transfer off the line,” Castiel says distractedly. He's trying not to think about it.

“Damn. Is he okay?”

“He's fine. He just doesn't want to fight anymore.”

“That's shitty.” Inias pauses. “He looked pretty upset, too.”

“Probably,” Castiel says, only half-listening. If he goes for battalion CP now, he'll have at least forty minutes for the briefing, and then ten minutes leftover to eat before parade formation. Of course, he may have to forego dinner entirely if the meeting runs over like it did yesterday, he supposes that's the price he'll have to pay for stopping to talk to the men.

“Cas,” Inias says. “Please tell me you were at least nice to the kid.”

Castiel lifts his eyes to meet Inias'. “It's not my job to be nice to people. Technically, he shouldn't have even come to me with that query. One of the platoon leaders could have shut that idea down before it even came to me.”

“Yeah, yeah, alright. Are you going to get food?”

“Not yet,” Castiel says. “I have to go meet Campbell.”

Inias pulls a face. “I'll walk you over.” As they start down the road towards the CP, Inias asks, “So how are you feeling about going back into the field?”

“Ecstatic.”

“I hear you. God, are the Krauts not bored yet?” Inias groans.

“Apparently not.” Castiel lets out a long breath. “But the Brits' 79th Armoured is moving up to Montbarey, and the 8th Infantry are closing in the other side, so we should break Brest before long if everything goes to plan.”

Inias laughs. “When does anything ever go to plan?”

Castiel tilts his head over. Inias isn't wrong.

“You think they'll give us some time of the line after Brest, or do you figure they'll just ship us off somewhere else immediately?” Inias asks, pushing his hands deep into the pockets of his combat pants.

“I think we'll be lucky to get three days before the next motor march,” Castiel says. “There's always going to be an impossible city that General Gerhardt needs a thousand men to attack.”

Inias grunts. “Jesus. You make it sound so hopeless.”

“And we still have to take Brest,” Castiel points out. “Which may be almost secured, but it's still not going to be easy.”

“God, you're a miserable son of a bitch,” Inias says. By this time, they've reached the building where 2nd Battalion staff are stationed, and they pause in front of the door. “Let me guess,” Inias goes on

cheerfully. “You're not gonna get a second of free time between here and Berlin, so I shouldn't make plans to have dinner with you.”

Castiel huffs his breath in some dry approximation of a laugh. “Sounds about right.”

Inias makes a low, drawn-out groan. “Fine.” He flaps a dismissive hand in the direction of the CP. “I'll see you when we move out.”

Castiel grimaces. When they move out – Jesus. He can't wait.

14th September, 1944

The air is so hot that Castiel feels as though he's swimming through it, made worse by the weight of his combats and his equipment, and someone in one-platoon is whistling.

“Sergeant Milligan,” Castiel says, and he rubs a thumb over his upper lip, wiping away sweat, “whoever that is – make them stop.”

Milligan calls ahead to get the offender to shut up, and when all falls back into silence, Castiel almost regrets it. Now there is nothing but their footsteps, the heavy breathing of men exhausted by the heat, the creak of insects in the grass. Castiel exhales slowly.

They've been patrolling since Saint-Renan, and while it's only ten miles from Fort Montbarey, those are starting to feel like the longest

miles Castiel has ever walked. Thankfully, it's been relatively quiet, as most of this area has already been cleared out by the Allied forces closing in around Brest. After ten-hundred-hours, one-platoon ran into a small German position still being defended by three men who surrendered immediately; they found an abandoned position in an old barn which still had some valuable intel lying around. Otherwise, it's been hot, and dull, and fucking hot.

Castiel pushes back his sleeve to check the time. Thirteen-twenty-six. His watch is slick with condensation.

At the head of the patrol, Private Maier turns halfway, spreads his arms to indicate a move into extended formation as they break through the trees into an open field. The company alters slowly, struggling through the tall grass and unevenly tilled soil. Beside Castiel in formation, Private Bradbury's boot get caught in a tangle of weeds, and he trips.

Castiel turns to him. “Are you alright?” he asks, voice low so as not to break noise discipline, and then there is a crack, and Castiel doesn't know what's happening, but the company is scattering and each platoon leader is yelling separately for their men to take cover, get down, now.

Castiel drops to his stomach. His first instinct is to call to find out who's hit, but that's not his priority. “Move up,” he yells, twisting his head left and right to get the message down the line. “Move up – don't stay where they saw you go down! Does anyone have a visual?”

From down the far end of the line, there is Lieutenant Alistair's voice. “Seen – quarter right of axis, base of farm-house--”

Castiel crawls forwards, beyond the space where the enemy may have seen him go down, an then he rolls onto his feet and runs for four-

platoon. He keeps low, one hand splayed over his helmet to keep it steady until he can find a moment to secure it.

The sun is at its highest point, yellow and bright enough that the air seems hazy, and Castiel runs. He stumbles as he slows, feet caught in the grass, and then he ducks beside Lieutenant Alistair. “Where?”

Alistair sits back on his heels, points with the flat of his hand. “Base of farm-house – to the left. You can see the metal.”

Castiel squints. “Alright, seen. You take four-platoon up to that hedgerow and get in position to lay down mortars on the position once I get one-platoon close enough to follow the shelling up with a direct assault. Clear?”

Alistair nods. Castiel climbs to his feet and sets off back down the line.

He lays down two- and three-platoon as a base of fire, and then takes Virgil and one-platoon up to flank around to the position. Strangely enough, the gunfire seems to decrease as they get closer, and Castiel thinks that perhaps this position is only manned by a few soldiers who don't want to get killed. Maybe they'll have another surrender on their hands, and nothing needs to go wrong.

Of course, in retrospect, there is another explanation for this phenomenon: it's a cow-shed.

“What the fuck?” Castiel says under his breath, and that's all the time he has to think about it, because the air around them is being sprayed with gunfire, and he has to get into cover.

Lieutenant Alistair comes running and throws himself down into the dirt beside Castiel. “Novak, there's nothing here--”

“I know – get four-platoon on the radio, tell them to hold on their orders until we have a confirmed enemy position. At least now we've narrowed down potentials. Move up one-platoon,” Castiel orders, and then, as an after-thought: “And someone get a fucking visual on the enemy!”

He drops his head against his chest and temporarily pushes away the thought that this is the second potentially platoon-threatening mistake Lieutenant Alistair has made. He doesn't have time for that.

It turns out the Germans are tucked at the base of a hedgerow, manning a camouflaged artillery position all out of shells. Virgil drives up hard, one-platoon sprinting as the other platoons press in with suppressive fire and heavy mortar deployment, and Castiel runs in with two-platoon. By the time they get there, the Germans have been reduced to three machine-gunners and one rifleman. There are two bodies slumped against their LMG tripods.

Ahead of them, Sergeant Milligan snaps off a warning shot over the position before he trains it out the men curled in their foxholes. “Don't move,” he yells at them, and calls for a translator over his shoulder.

“Callahee, go help Sergeant Milligan,” Castiel orders as he comes into the position, rifle pulled up into his shoulder. “One-platoon, check them over. I want two-platoon going through intelligence.”

“Yes, sir!”

Castiel pulls up three- and four-platoon to lay down an all-round defensive while they clear the position, and he gets Spangler on the

radio to battalion to report the contact. He wanders through the platoons, and then he flops back against a swell of turf beside Inias, who seems to be pouring the entire contents of his canteen into his mouth in one go.

He exhales slowly, eyes still moving over the rest of the company to make sure that everything is order. “I can't believe I actually forgot what it was like,” he comments.

Inias takes one last gulp from his canteen, and then lowers it, gasping noisily. “What?”

“Being on the line,” Castiel says. “Being in command.”

Inias grins. “Is it every bit as good as you thought it would be?”

Castiel huffs his breath out. He pulls off his helmet, pushes a hand back through his hair where it is sweat-slick against his skull. He can feel the way it sticks up in disarray, and so he looks over at Inias. “Better,” he says, straight-faced, and Inias cracks up laughing.

From the other end of the company, First Sergeant Masters comes picking his way through the knee-high grass, and Castiel knows that he's come for a situation report. Castiel puts his helmet back on and pushes himself up onto his feet to greet him.

“First Sergeant,” Castiel says, already bracing himself for bad news. “Who did we lose?”

“We didn't,” Masters says. He raises his eyebrows. “I know, I know. *Quelle surprise.* Let's contain ourselves.”

In spite of Masters' sarcasm, Castiel is surprised. It isn't that he lacks faith in his leadership skills, but he is beginning to learn that he will be losing men everywhere he goes. “We had casualties, though, I assume?”

“Oh, for sure.” Masters lists them off his fingers. “Lance Corporal Stepp got grazed, Private Miller got pinged through the shoulder, and I think Lieutenant Hester sprained his ankle. He fell into a rabbit warren.”

Castiel nods. “Alright. They're mobile, though?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. We'll push through to re-org a little east of this position and we can set up a temporary harbour area – the men can rest and get some food in while we radio our coordinates into battalion for a casualty evac and pick-up of prisoners.”

“Yes, sir. When do you want us to move out?”

“We'll give them five minutes. I'll go around and speak to the other platoon leaders.” Castiel gives a curt nod to indicate that the First Sergeant is dismissed, and he fumbles with his webbing to get his canteen out. He takes a long drink, and he unzips the top half of his combat jacket to cool down. He can feel sweat gathering thickly at his waist where his webbing hems his clothing in tight, and he misses those hot showers already.

They move out, and then they settle again, and as they wait for battalion to get a scout car to them, Baker Company falls into easy

relaxation. Men sprawl out in the sunshine, stripped down to their T-shirts to soak up the rays; some of the replacements are carving their name into a tree. Harvelle has set up on a fallen trunk to offer haircuts to the men who are too hot, and Corporal Mills is off to the side, telling some loud, obscene jokes that have one-platoon laughing themselves hoarse. Mostly, people are getting in food and water, taking the chance to sit down and get out of their heavy clothes.

Castiel tilts back against the trunk of a drooping poplar and watches them with some amusement as he fiddles with the metallic wrapper of his K-rations. The wrapper slips in his hands, and Inias leans over to take the bar out of his hands.

“Who the hell put you in charge?” Inias asks, shaking his head. “Can't eat open your own damn rations.” He holds the rations out, now successfully opened.

“Blame Ant Milton,” Castiel says. He takes the bar. “Thanks. It was his idea.”

Inias laughs. He tips his head back in the sunshine, closes his eyes. “God, this is nice. You know, this is what I came to France for. Nice weather. Good cheese.”

Castiel cocks an eyebrow. “Cheese?”

“Admittedly, I haven't seen any cheese since we left England, but I'm sure it's somewhere.”

Castiel finishes his rations, and Inias helps his get his canteen out of the back of his webbing, and Castiel takes off his helmet to splash some water inside to cool the metal down. He can't bring himself to put the helmet back on right away, though. He drops it at his feet and

scrubs a hand through his hair, desperate to cool down.

“Christ,” Inias says, and he looks at Castiel with something close to horror. “We need to get Harvelle over here. You need a fucking haircut.”

“No, I don't,” Castiel says, even though he is more than aware that, in the four months since England, his hair has grown far too long. He hates it, and he does need it cut, but he doesn't like the implications of this conversation.

Inias laughs. “Yes, you do. I'm serious.” He reaches across to flick at a strand of Castiel's sweaty hair where it curls over his ear. “Look at this. It's a disgrace.”

“Get off!”

“Cas. You look like a greasy mop.”

Castiel jerks his head away. “I'm not letting Harvelle cut my hair.”

“You don't trust him? He's one of your best NCOs, he's been nothing but good to you,” Inias says, in the voice of the deeply wounded.

“That's why I don't trust him.”

“Ouch. Okay, what if I cut your hair?”

Castiel narrows his eyes at Inias. “I trust you even less.”

Inias slaps a hand to his chest. “That hurts. That really does hurt. Why not? I'm great with a pair of scissors.”

“Do you remember last time?” Castiel points out. “That was--”

“An unmitigated disaster, alright, I will admit that.” Inias is doing his best not to laugh, his lips clamped tight together. “To be honest, though, it was hilarious. But this isn't going to be a repeat of last time. I will genuinely try my best not scalp, injure, or otherwise humiliate you.”

Castiel frowns, but he can't think of any further reason to refuse, and so, reluctantly, he retrieves his helmet from the floor, and follows Inias over to Harvelle, to ask to borrow the scissors next.

“You don't want one of my luxury treatments, lieutenant?” Harvelle asks.

“He can do you one of them nice do's, sir, like Rita Hayworth has,” Ash Lowell joins in, and they're falling over themselves laughing.

“No, thanks, I think Lieutenant Novak's got trust issues enough as it is,” Inias says, and he flashes a grin over at Castiel. “Just the scissors, please, if you can spare them.”

Harvelle takes a couple more minutes on Bradbury's hair – which Castiel can see he's doing a good job on, and he can't help but wonder if he's making a mistake letting Inias do it – and then he passes the scissors over. Not without some trepidation, Castiel sits cross-legged in

the grass, and he tries not to flinch.

He has no real fear of damage to his face, but he has never been a fan of having sharp things near his eyes, and so he tightens his jaw and does his best to bear it as Inias gets to work snipping away at his over-long hair.

It doesn't take too long, as it's mostly a matter of grabbing handfuls and hacking it short until it's more or less all the same length, but Inias keeps making these little humming noises that sound like frustration, and Castiel is worried. He tries not to think that something is going wrong – Inias is competent, and everything is perfectly under control – and then Dean Winchester comes walking past and starts to laugh.

“What?” Castiel grouches.

“Nothing, sir,” Dean says, and he grins. “You look very handsome.”

Infuriatingly, Castiel feels a ridiculous rush of warmth in his stomach, but the very idea of Dean making him flustered over a stupid, throwaway phrase is so irritating to Castiel that he resolves to be unfriendly. However, Dean is still grinning from ear to ear and Castiel can't stop looking at him.

Inias steps back to study Castiel. He leans over towards Dean. “What do you think?” he asks. “Is that straight?”

Dean tilts his head. “Am I supposed to answer honestly, or to humour you, sir?”

“Honestly,” Castiel says firmly, as Inias laughs.

“Honestly? Honestly, it's about as straight as a dog's back leg.”

Castiel glares, and he does his best not to think about the fact that Inias is making an effort to include Dean in this. For just a moment, Castiel catches himself wondering if this is what it's like for normal people: trying to integrate their friends with their-- sexually attractive subordinates. Castiel swallows.

“Shit.” Inias groans and he scratches a hand backwards through his own hair. “Okay. Where am I going wrong?”

Dean steps up, points. “It's not too bad, just – here. You've gone too short.”

“Jesus Christ,” Castiel says.

Inias slaps his arm. “Hey. Be quiet.”

Castiel jerks away, and shoots him a frown. “I thought the customer was always right.”

“Yeah, yeah. The customer's always a pain in my ass.”

Dean is enjoying this far too much.

“Okay, fine. I'm deferring to your better judgement. See? This is me

deferring. How do I fix it?”

“Shave it off.”

“Winchester,” Castiel says warningly.

“Here, let me.” Dean takes the scissors, and Castiel grows very still. His eyes flash quickly to Inias', as though to ask *is this alright? Is this suspicious?* – and then Dean's hand is steady, gentle, on the side of his head, and Castiel only has the presence of mind to worry about Dean putting one of his eyes out.

“Careful with those,” Castiel mutters. “They're sharp.”

“Shit, sir. I was gonna go ahead and slice up your whole skull, but now you've said that I'll try real hard to just get the hair.”

Somewhere off to Castiel's side, Inias is trying to stifle his laughter. If Castiel weren't so concerned about holding still, he'd kick him in the knee.

Dean's hand brushes backwards through Castiel's hair, and he stiffens.

“Easy, sir. Surgeon's hands, remember? I can hold still – whether you can, though, is a whole other--”

“I can hold still,” Castiel says. He stares straight ahead, focusing on anything but the careful way Dean sweeps his hand through Castiel's hair.

“Great. Then we'll get along just fine. Besides,” Dean goes on conversationally, “I've been doing this for years. I always cut Sam's hair. His is a little longer though, and he doesn't like it so tidy as yours, but it's a similar enough idea.”

Dean's hands are slow and steady, and Castiel doesn't even listen out anxiously for the snip of the scissors as he works. He is trying to distract himself with the conversations of the men nearby, the way the sky looks, where the company is going to move next, but every nerve in his body is drawing towards the gentle touch of Dean's hand, the way he brushes his hair over to one side and then another to check the length. He is so careful, and Castiel has been learning recently that Dean is gentler than he could have imagined, and it twists something in Castiel's gut that hurts and hurts. He feels shaken.

“You wear it like this, right?” Dean says, pushing Castiel's hair over to one side.

Castiel breathes. “I wear it however it fits under my helmet,” he says, mouth dry, but yes, he does wear it like that, and he can't believe Dean notices. He can't believe Dean is styling his hair like he's his fucking husband.

He can't think of how to make Dean stop, but he knows that he should – there's flustered heat rising in his cheeks and under his jaw, and goosebumps lifting on the back of his neck, and he feels jittery with nerves. Dean's fingers are steady and firm, and Castiel is so focused on his own breathing and trying to keep it normal that he can feel himself over-compensating – breathing heavily by pure virtue of trying to be normal. It's fucking ridiculous. His hands fidget at his sides, and still Dean is gentle with him.

Castiel can't do it.

“That's enough,” he says, and he jerks his head away. “It's short enough. Thank you.”

Dean balks. “You don't even know what it looks like.”

“Well, I trust you,” Castiel says hastily, just wanting this experience to be over and to get away from this uncomfortably intimate moment with Dean, and he doesn't really think about how he has never said that before, in so many words.

Dean is looking at him, scissors held loosely in one hand, and Castiel doesn't know what to say to that mutedly happy expression, the curve of his smile, so he mutters some kind of thank you and excuses himself. He takes the scissors out of Dean's hand, ignoring the way their fingers bump, and he goes to return the scissors to Harvelle. He doesn't come back.

All in all, Castiel thinks he's getting very good at running away from Dean.

Of course, that's not the end of it, because it never is with Dean, and while Castiel manages to keep away from him for several hours – a personal record, in all honesty – as Baker moves out again to continue patrolling down towards Fort Montbarey, they do eventually have to stop and set up a harbour area for the night. Castiel is busy, with his maps and reports and company plans, Dean does at last come looking.

Dean finds him studying the map of Brest. Castiel knows that they're nowhere near that point yet, and that the Allied forces have yet to find a clear way in, but he wants to make sure that he knows every part of the city for when that time comes. He doesn't want to be stranded in the wrong area; he doesn't want to walk into a trap.

“Looking good, lieutenant,” Dean says, coming up beside Castiel, and he points. “You do something new with your hair?”

Castiel ignores him.

Dean glances over his shoulder to check for people nearby, and then he presses in closer, and automatically Castiel freezes up. His fingers tighten on the map corners, crumpling paper.

“Look, sir, I'm sorry, I just – I don't get what the problem is,” Dean says. “I mean, was it the boundaries thing? Did we have a boundary set out about cutting hair?”

Castiel can't believe they're having this conversation. He doesn't think he'd need to be so obvious – Dean can't touch him in public, because it is becoming increasingly apparent that Castiel has absolutely no control over himself.

“Winchester,” he says tiredly.

“I just don't get it – unless I was doing something that--” Dean cuts himself off, eyes wide, and a kind of realisation blooms across his face. “Oh my god. Sir. Was I getting you hot and bothered?”

“What?” Castiel says, incredulous. “No!” Jesus Christ, he knows he's fucking lonely but it's not so bad that he gets hard from a fucking hair-cut – but then Dean is staring at him, uncomprehending, and Castiel's stomach turns over because he can't have Dean even contemplate the other option. The way that Castiel had melted underneath his hands, the way his breath had snagged in his chest when Dean's thumb brushed gentle over his hairline, past his ear, along the nape of his

neck; the way that he had wanted to stay like that forever, in that quiet intimacy with Dean – that is something that Dean does not ever get to find out. Castiel feels anxiety spike in his gut like he's going to vomit, and so instead he says, “Yes.”

Dean blinks. “What?”

“Yes, you--” Castiel can barely remember how to speak. He feels unsettled to his core. “I wanted – I--”

“You don't have to say it,” Dean interrupts, and there it is again – Dean, offering Castiel a way out, taking care of him in the tiniest, most subtle ways so that sometimes Castiel doesn't even notice. “Sir, I was only teasing, I didn't mean to--”

“It's fine,” Castiel says, even though there is an enormous part of him that is desperate for his usual escape route. Say something cruel, then leave. Say something cruel. Castiel feels like he can't breathe, and here he is being civil. “Thank you.”

“You could've just told me to stop, sir,” Dean points out. “You're my commanding officer – if I'm being an asshole or making you uncomfortable or, you know – whatever—” he raises his eyebrows, “then just say.”

Castiel doesn't answer that. He didn't want Dean to stop; that's the whole point.

“Because, seriously, I'm doing my best to do everything the way you want it – boundaries, everything – but if you can't just talk to me--” Dean says, and there's more to that sentence, but he steps closer, head ducked as he lowers his voice so that it's a conversation just for the two of them, and Castiel panics.

“Stay away from me,” Castiel says, and the words come out in a burst that he doesn't understand until they're already out in the air between them. He wants to take them back.

Dean flinches back, and then he is staring at Castiel, mouth slack with confusion and what looks like hurt but Castiel doesn't want to think about it too much. “Sir?”

Castiel doesn't know what to do. “I didn't--” He can't get any further. He holds his map between them, the paper screwed up in his hands, and it feels like a wall between them.

Dean looks away.

“I don't mean that,” Castiel manages, voice strangled, and that's the best he can do.

With his face turned away, Castiel can't see Dean's expression, but he can see the disbelieving way he raises his eyebrows. “Right.”

“Winchester,” Castiel tries, and then there is someone calling *Lieutenant Novak* from twenty feet away, and Castiel looks over to see Virgil heading their way. He looks back at Dean. “Christ. Alright. Fuck. I'll speak with you later.”

“Yeah, okay.” Dean sounds unconvinced.

“I'm serious, Winchester. Please,” Castiel says. “Dean.” He hates the way Dean's name sounds in his mouth. He swallows past the feeling,

the way it feels like his guts are crawling up his throat. “Please, don't go.”

Dean meets Castiel's eyes, and Castiel thinks he looks tired. Dean nods, just once, quickly, and then Lieutenant Virgil is close enough that they can't say anymore, and Castiel turns his back on Dean.

“Virgil, is everything alright?” Castiel asks, and it almost concerns him how easily he slips back into the person he is supposed to be when he's not with Dean. Straight-backed, voice hard and calm in equal measure. He folds his map up to tuck it away.

“We've got a mix-up on the sentry rota for tonight,” Virgil says, and he pulls a slip of paper from his pocket. “See, here? We've got Corporal Harvelle down for both the oh-two-hundred squad patrol and the oh-two-fifteen eastern sentry position. I would just take Harvelle off the patrol to avoid confusing the rota, but then Harvelle is only NCO with real combat experience on that patrol and he would need replacing.”

“I understand.”

Castiel takes the rota from him and studies it. He re-organises the men designated to go on patrol, replacing Harvelle with Corporal Mills, and ensures that every soldier tasked with something tonight didn't have a duty last night, and similarly that they've had their names made note of so that they aren't signed up for anything tomorrow night. He goes to check with the other platoon leaders, and he makes sure that those whose duties have been changed are informed of that fact, and only then is he free to go looking for Dean – more than an hour later.

He can't find him anywhere, and the harbour area is mostly quiet, and then, eventually, he does locate him – curled up under his blanket roll under his bivouac, fast asleep alongside Private Bradbury.

There is a moment where, childishly, Castiel considers whether it would be ridiculous to call the entire company to stand-to, just so that Dean has to wake up and talk to him, but he comes to his senses. He stands there a moment longer, hands deep in the pockets of his combat pants, and he runs his fingers idly over the chain of his crucifix.

Private Bradbury's eyes crack open, and then he nearly jumps out of his skin, seeing Castiel.

“My apologies, private,” Castiel says, and he instinctively backs away a step.

“Holy crap, sir,” Bradbury whispers, shifting under his blanket to better see him. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, thank you. I came looking for Sergeant Winchester, but he's – occupied. I'm sorry to have disturbed you.”

“Do you want me to kick him awake?”

“No, thank you. That won't be necessary.” Castiel nods to acknowledge Bradbury, and then he apologises again for waking him, and heads back to his own shell scraping. He can speak to Dean in the morning; after all, it isn't so far away.

15 th September, 1944

They need to pull back. They need to pull back. The mortars are coming in hard and fast, but there is nowhere to go. The earth is shaking apart under his feet, and there is the hollow sound of someone screaming, and his hands are dark with blood, and Castiel jerks awake.

For several moments, he lies flat on his back in the dirt and can only breathe ragged as he comes to terms with what is not happening to him.

This is not the minefield of La Trinité. His company is not under attack.

Castiel inhales deeply.

He uses a flashlight underneath his blanket to check his watch – oh-four-eleven. He's barely been asleep two hours, and now he's wide awake, heart thundering in his chest, and he knows he'll have no chance at getting back to sleep. It doesn't matter; he doesn't think he'd want to go back to sleep if that's what is waiting for him.

Castiel kneels to roll up his blanket roll and stuff it back into his haversack. He zips up his combat jacket, slings on his webbing, slips his arm through the sling of his rifle. He cocks it, snaps the safety on. He climbs out of his shell scraping.

He doesn't really have anywhere to go, but he supposes it's never a bad idea to check the perimeter, to go and see if those on sentry are alright. He walks every side of the harbour area, and he checks all three sentry positions twice, and then he is just walking aimlessly. The time is just short of oh-four-thirty – an hour before the rest of the company is due to be awake.

The air is chill and clear, the light just beginning to bleed grey with approaching dawn, and there is dew collecting on the rim of Castiel's helmet. His ears are cold, and he is beginning to regret his haircut.

He walks in slow, ever expanding circles through the harbour area. He practices treading lightly, avoiding sticks and stones underfoot – good tactical patrol practice. He looks over his maps. He counts bivouacs, and he squints through the trees until the tangled branches look like enemy soldiers, and then there is a crackle in the undergrowth.

Castiel looks up sharply. “Who goes there?”

Someone is approaching. They are little more than a silhouette in the early light, but the figure shifts their weight from one foot to another, and just like that, Castiel knows. “It's me, sir.”

Castiel squints. “What are you doing up?” he asks, and even he can hear the way his tone changes once he knows that it's Dean.

“Couldn't sleep, sir.”

“That's no excuse. You need your rest.”

“Right. You know, I'm sensing a kind of pot, kettle, situation here, sir--”

“Winchester,” Castiel interrupts. “If I may, I want to talk to you about – what I said.”

Dean falls quiet. Through the dark, Castiel can see the way his silhouette moves; he can see that he tilts to look back over his shoulder. Castiel doesn't know if he's checking for anyone within earshot or looking for a way out.

“I want to apologise for what I said last night,” Castiel says stiffly. He takes a deep breath and forces himself to continue. “It does not reflect my feelings on the matter.”

Dean shifts his weight again. “Yeah, I know that,” he mutters.

Castiel frowns. “But I--”

Dean huffs a sound that is almost a laugh. “What, you think I got this far without figuring out that when things get a little too heavy for you, you turn into a real fucking asshole?”

Castiel flinches. He swallows hard.

“Look, I get it. I think I do, at least, but – Christ.” Dean breaks off, scrubs a hand down over his face. “Honestly, sir, I can't deal with the mixed signals here, I can't. So you gotta tell me right now where we stand because from where I am, there's one set of rules you say out loud, and a whole other rulebook you don't, and I gotta know which one I'm supposed to be going from.”

Castiel stares at him. “I don't what you're talking about – I don't keep changing the rules.”

“Oh yeah?” Dean challenges, and the next thing Castiel knows, Dean is counting off his fingers. “You tell me we gotta stop this and then you can't get your hands off me. You tell me we're not friends and then you're regaling me with your whole sorry life story, you tell me to stay the hell away from you and then you – you fucking come looking, for Christ's sake. You told me to stay the hell away from you and then changed your mind *seconds* afterwards, okay, you push my hand up your leg while you tell me to stop, you tell me only kiss when we're fucking and then you lay on on me in broad freaking daylight--”

Castiel's breath stutters.

“--so yeah, I can't tell what boundaries are real, and which ones you just wanna pretend are real, and I just can't keep up,” Dean says. There is something raw and honest in his voice that Castiel doesn't think he's heard before, and he steps towards Castiel. “If you tell me – if you just fucking talk to me properly, for once in your life, and say... say, *this is what I want and I wanna pretend that I don't,* then, you know, fine. But I can't keep guessing.”

Castiel doesn't know what to say.

“So you gotta tell me,” Dean says, and his voice is gentler now, but still firm. “What do you want?”

Castiel's throat works. He can't meet Dean's eyes. “I don't know,” he admits, and he hears Dean make a noise in the back of his throat that could be disgust or frustration or anything in between, and Castiel feels panic tight in his chest. He has to say something. He blurts out, “I want you.”

His voice is only quiet, but it feels momentous. Castiel knows that even if he never says any of this out loud, he must say it with his hands and his mouth and the way he looks at Dean, but it doesn't calm

the nerves in Castiel's gut – and it doesn't impress Dean.

Dean shakes his head and looks away over his shoulder. His mouth twists down with frustration. “I don't know what that means.”

“Neither do I.”

Dean steps in closer still, so close that Castiel feels almost trapped by the height and breadth of him, and he wants to back away, but he won't. This time, he won't. Dean's eyes move over Castiel's face. “What if I wanted to kiss you?”

Castiel pulls in a deep breath to steady himself, and he doesn't think about the scattered pattern of Dean's freckles over the bridge of his nose, the sweet curve of Dean's mouth. He has the words ready in the back of his throat – *we can't* – and he wants to speak, but he doesn't know how. They could. It's forty minutes until the rest of the company is due to be awake, and they are far from the sentry positions, and far from the nearest shell scraping, and the world is still and quiet. They could, and Castiel is terrified of it.

“Come on,” Dean urges, voice soft, and he leans in. Castiel can feel the warm rush of his breath. “Tell me you're scared shitless.”

Castiel swallows – the sound audible in the hush between them. He exhales, and with an enormous effort, he lifts his eyes to meet Dean's, steady. “I'm not scared.”

Dean's gaze is unwavering. He raises his eyebrows. “Is that so?”

Every nerve in Castiel's body feels fine-tuned to respond to Dean;

when Dean speaks, Castiel is aware, even without looking, of the shape of his mouth, the press of his tongue behind his teeth, and Castiel wants him. “I'm not,” he says.

“Because, from where I'm standing, it sure looks to me like--”

Castiel surges forwards and kisses Dean hard. He doesn't give him time to back away or to have second-thoughts; he lifts his hands to cup the back of Dean's head, and he pulls him in until they're pressed together in one long line, and he opens his mouth.

Dean's breath catches, and then there are hands on Castiel's waist, solid as anything, and Castiel rocks slightly up onto his toes to get closer, hands tight on the back of Dean's head. He slips his tongue into Dean's mouth, kissing him hot and urgent, teeth scraping.

Then, confusingly, Dean pulls back, and Castiel is left clinging to him, breathing heavy, and Dean just looks at him. Castiel's mouth is slack, open, and he stares at Dean with the sense that he's just had the ground pulled out from underneath him. “What are you doing?”

Dean says, “That wasn't what I was talking about.”

Castiel can feel his pulse a mile a minute as it thunders dully in the back of his skull, and when he inhales, he is unsteady. He watches Dean, starstruck, and then Dean leans in again.

Dean kisses him, but the touch of his mouth is so gentle that Castiel feels dizzy. He kisses him slowly, and Castiel is standing with his hands uselessly caught in Dean's clothes, and he doesn't know what to do.

There is something tight and aching in his chest that feels like panic, and there is a part of him that wants to push Dean away and get as far away from this as possible, but Dean's mouth is slow and careful, and Castiel has never before felt so desperate to hold onto something.

Castiel surrenders to it. He finds his hands tangled into the fabric of Dean's jacket, fists clenched tight as though that's the only thing keeping him upright, and he closes his eyes.

He lets Dean kiss him sweetly. He doesn't think about the way his heart kicks like a drum. He doesn't think that he is in love with the way Dean holds him.

Dean's hands are on his waist, and he grounds him.

15th September, 1944

Baker Company join the fight for Fort Montbarey just before dawn.

The 115th captured the fortress on the 12th of September, but a swift German counter-attack meant that the 115th had been driven out and forced to retreat. Now it's time to get Montbarey back, while the Germans are not yet settled into their position and can be pulled clean out. It shouldn't be too much like La Trinité, Castiel thinks. It should be easier than that.

As the men form up ready to move out, Castiel walks one last perimeter of their harbour area to ensure that they've left nothing behind, that there is no incriminating intel left at sentry points that

could be picked up by enemy patrols. He isn't sure it'd make much a difference currently, seeing as it seems the entirety of the German force in this area is condensed into Brest for one last siege, but it's good practice. Castiel traces the edge of the harbour, tracing footsteps where he can see them, but then he is interrupted halfway around by a tall silhouette.

“Halt! Who goes there?” the figure says, in a bizarrely gruff voice that Castiel supposes is being done for comedic effect, and it takes him a moment to realise that it's Dean.

“Get out of the way, Winchester.”

“Oh, shit. Sorry, sir – didn't realise it was you,” Dean says, speaking normally now. In the dark, Castiel's eyes have adjusted until he can see the lines of Dean clearly, and the moonlight scattered through the trees is cool and silver.

There is something off about Dean's unusual remorse, especially paired with the idiotic voice, and it stops Castiel in his tracks. He narrows his eyes. “Were you imitating me?”

“Uhhh,” Dean says. “No?” The guilt is evident in his voice.

Castiel rolls his eyes. He steps past Dean. “I don't sound like that. And you should be with the rest of the company, ready to move out.”

As he continues towards the rest of the company, he can dimly hear Dean laughing behind him – and the sound of him saying to himself, *I don't sound like that,* in a voice too deep and gravelly not to be ridiculous. Castiel scowls,and he fights, tight-lipped, against the urge to smile.

They move out just before oh-five-thirty hours, a quick march to Fort Montbarey, hook up with the rest of the 2nd Battalion for their orders as stipulated by the commander of the 115th, and just like that, they're back on the front-line as Castiel remembers it. He thinks distinctly that he is going to die, and that's familiar enough.

Baker Company are on the north-eastern side, one- and two-platoon on the main assault, three-platoon in reserve, and there is no waiting for a signal. The battle has already been going on here for three days, and they fit straight into the assault. They join the perimeter, fit into a extended line with four-platoon just behind to fire mortar into the trench system at the forefront of the fortress, and the other platoons lay down aggressive fire that slowly pushes in closer, closer.

Castiel runs up and down the line to encourage everyone, to pass on instructions to his platoon leaders and his NCOs; he runs until there is an ache up the back of his thighs. He wheels around the back end of three-platoon to get the rest of the way to Lieutenant Alistair – and his foot rolls over on a clump of loose dirt, and he stumbles. He almost goes down, and then there's a hand lunging out to snatch a handful of his combat jacket and haul him upright.

“You gotta stop doing that,” Dean says, and before Castiel can stop him, he adjusts Castiel's rifle sling. Smoothes a hand over the shoulder of Castiel's combat jacket to brush out the wrinkles.

Without meaning to, Castiel looks at his mouth. Then, reluctantly, he pulls away, and he leaves Dean behind as he continues back towards four-platoon.

The sun creeps higher in the sky, and there is no discernible difference on the bunker – at least, not that Castiel can see. The men of Baker are hot and exhausted, and hours of aggressive fire means that they are running ever lower on ammunition, and Castiel thinks that doesn't

know how much longer they can keep it up, when Private Maier comes over with a radio, and with it, the order to move up.

The 115th gets their foot in the door again with the Fort Montbarey trench system, breaking through to the main bunker complex, but following them is not easy. It's a mindless advance – little of the way of tactics or strategy, as the way in lends nothing for cover, but commands only a direct run up to the next RVP, and right in the view of the bunkers' pillboxes. Castiel sends in one platoon at a time, and he tries not to think of the exposed, desperate climb up the beach on D-Day, and there is nothing to it but to run.

Castiel watches men from each platoon be flung back loose like rag-dolls as machine-gun rounds cut easily through, and his mouth is dry with the fear that he is just running his company into the ground. He can't help but think that this battle should not be won by sheer numbers alone; there has to be a better way than simply throwing so many bodies at the fortress walls that some of them get through.

He swallows hard. Orders are orders.

By fourteen-hundred-hours, they have broken through, cleared out the trenches, and are laying down yet another base of suppressive fire while they wait for their next order – and it comes in a form Castiel would not have anticipated.

“Get out of the way, get out of the way!” There is a low voice behind Castiel, British and what Castiel only vaguely recognises as being the accent from the southern part, and it belongs to an officer from the 79th Armoured who looks thoroughly unimpressed. He is shorter than Castiel would have expected. “Jesus Christ, what do I have to do to get you to move out of the bloody way?”

Castiel pushes himself up onto one knee and turns back. “Can I help

you?”

The officer raises his eyebrows. He drops into a crouch just short of Castiel. “Oh, thank the Lord, you do speak English. Get your men out of here, we're trying to bring our crocodiles through and your lot are scattered everywhere so we can't move.”

Castiel's eyes fall to the pin on the man's collar: Captain. “Yes, sir--”

“No sir, three bags fucking full – just move!” the captain says brusquely, and just like that, he's back on his feet and jogging back the way he came.

The order is issued along the line of the 116th Regiment for everyone to pull back to allow room for the tanks to come and bust the fortress open.

The British Royal Armoured Corps roll through – AVREs first, which Castiel has seen before but never in action, which crawl up to within a hundred yards of the bunker and fire a shell the size of Castiel's head that decimates the bunker's front wall with a sound like a thunderclap. Then, as Castiel's ears ring and ring, each AVRE is followed up by another tank, the likes of which Castiel has never seen.

“The hell is that thing?” Kevin Tran yells, and Castiel is of a similar thought.

The tank's turret is longer, narrower, and behind the tank itself is towed a wheeled vat, linked up by a series of pipes and tubes, and Castiel only realises that the British crocodile tanks are mobile flame-throwers a split-second before it fires.

“Fuck,” Castiel says softly, and then the world disappears around him disappears with a flash of petroleum fire so fierce and eye-searingly bright that Castiel's vision blurs at the edges. He flinches back, squinting through it, but he can't look away.

He watches as the tank pours fire into the hole in the bunker from fifty yards away, and when the screaming starts, he feels like he's going to be sick.

From beside Castiel, Lieutenant Alistair says softly, “Christ. Now that's fire-power.”

Castiel looks over at him and finds him smiling. Castiel doesn't reply.

He looks back out at the bunker, where men are beginning to climb over the ragged edges of the hole torn in the bunker and pour out through the doors. He can see the flames licking over them, the way the petroleum jelly sticks tight to everything it touches and won't come off. There are men struggling to get out of their jackets as the fire burns bright on their skin and hair, and the air is hot enough that Castiel's face is beading with sweat. There is the gulping, unsteady hiss of the crocodile tanks belching their stream of fire, and there is the hollow screaming desperation of men burning alive, and Castiel stares straight through it. He does his best not to see.

He turns to Alistair. “Get your men ready to move.” He heads back down the line to the rest of the company, gathers his platoon-leaders, and gets them ready. They are waiting on their orders, but they are locked and loaded.

Castiel becomes aware of someone settling beside him, and he looks over to see the same British captain from the 79th Armoured as earlier. “How about those crocodile tanks, eh, boys?” he says, and Castiel can't tell whether or not that sounds like remorse. There is silence for a

beat, and then the officer looks over, cocks his eyebrows. “What are you waiting for, an invitation? Light the bastards up.”

There are still German men inside the bunker; Castiel can hear them screaming. He breathes deep, tells himself not to linger on it. He tells himself they're not people.

He snaps the next clip onto his rifle, and he pulls it back into his shoulder.

17th September, 1944

First word is that the 175th have knifed through the external defences of Brest and pushed straight in.

The call on the radio comes from Major Campbell, telling them to move up, be ready, and Baker is pulled around from their patrol south towards the Penfeld River. They are drawn into the 116th, Fox Company on their left, Easy on their right. Castiel has no idea what's happening, but when he voices this concern to Captain Laufeyson, it's laughed off.

“When do we ever know what the hell we're doing?” he says, and Castiel won't admit that he has a point.

The 116th tacks on the tail-end of the 115th up through Recouvrance, and the next thing Castiel knows, half the 29th Infantry Division is pouring into the city streets of Brest and everything is broken up into chaos.

“One- and four-platoon, flank left towards the Penfeld until you make

contact with Charlie Company--"

Castiel is interrupted by the roar of an incoming shell that builds and builds until the air is thick with the sound of it, and Castiel is yelling for his men to clear the streets, stay out of sight, and the first shell punches a hole the size of a tank in the church behind second squad. There is a cascade of rubble and brick-dust that comes down, and the soldiers are torn between staying back in cover and getting out of the way of falling debris, and then the next shell comes screaming over.

"Make contact with Able Company," Castiel starts yelling again, as he presses in close beside Lieutenants Virgil and Alistair. "Keep clear of their arcs of fire and get into an extended formation to push the line forwards. Your objective is the church – do not proceed forwards of that point without word from me, is that clear? Wait until the rest of the battalion is in position."

The two platoon-leaders nod and head away with their men, and Castiel follows two- and three-platoon on their way west through the narrow alleys and cobbled roads.

"Clear those buildings," he yells, and his eyes move quickly over the higher building for the glint of metal or a muzzle-flash, hyper-aware of every potential hiding spot for a sniper.

Inias and Hester diverge around either side of a small park, staggered formation, and Castiel goes with Hester. One-platoon breaks down into squads, and Castiel fits himself into the one behind Lieutenant Hester as he keeps an eye out for hidden enemy positions.

There – at the mouth of the intersection, there is a building whose first-storey window has been smashed in, and through that window is the distinct dull shine of gunmetal, and sure enough, as Castiel watches, there is muzzle-flash, and there is the crack of shots being

squeezed off.

“Take cover--” He runs to throw himself back into a nearby doorway. He presses himself close against the wood, tilts his head slightly to peer down the road. The gun in the window flashes hot again.

Castiel takes a moment. He flips up the collar of his combat jacket to conceal his ranking pin, and he breathes, and then he runs for a disused auto-mobile up the road. He runs hard, skids on one boot, and then drops to hide behind the bonnet as machine-gun fire rattles out overhead. He secures his helmet, and then he twists to yell for Lieutenant Hester.

It takes him a minute to get through – Hester is shouting himself hoarse, his voice pitching up somewhere near hysteria as he says, *move up, fucking move up and get out of there* – but then, thankfully, Hester hears him and is calm.

“Enemy seen, first-storey window opposing intersection – get smoke in there and a base of fire,” Castiel calls. “Bring up first squad to clear!”

The men of one-platoon are kicked into movement. There is Hester, rifle pulled up into shoulder and squeezing off shots into the window at the end of the street even as he calls out his orders; three replacement soldiers run forwards to get smoke grenades down, and before Castiel can tell them to get the fuck back and out of the enemy's sight-lines, one of them is thrown sharply back by a round to the head.

“Get down,” he yells, and then the second of the three is torn through by one burst of fire – and finally, the third man gets the picture. Castiel lets out his breath. “Christ,” he whispers. Dean comes running, hands already rummaging in his medical bag, and Castiel lets himself breathe.

Thankfully, Corporal Quentin gets up there with one well-aimed smoke grenade, and as it hisses and begins to spurt thick red smoke, Castiel calls for one-platoon to switch fire, calls for first squad on him, and he takes off.

He sprints, ducked low, and he breathes in through his mouth quick and sharp – keep going, keep going – and then he skids as he gets out of range, hits the wall hard. It jolts his bad shoulder, and there's a split-second of pain that sears up through his arm, and then he's back in control. He drops to one knee, cocks and checks his weapon, snaps it forwards. He unhooks a grenade from his webbing.

“Quentin, Hanscum, Bass, up front!” he shouts. “Ready to clear!”

He stands, pressed in close against the wall. He takes a deep breath, snaps the pin clean – he counts one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three – and then he hurls the grenade through the open window.

Castiel flinches down, and he feels the explosion through the wall at his back. He wheels around, climbs the two steps, and smashes the door into the front room with his elbow. He steps back, then, lets his men push past him to clear the room and the rest of the building, and he steps back out into the street.

He catches the eye of Lieutenant Hester on the far side of the intersection and waves for the platoon to move up. They split up left and right of the intersection – Hester with second and third squad, Castiel with first – filter around and come back together on the road that cuts through Mesnos.

The air is thick with the sound of gunfire, with shells crashing down deafening in every part of the city, and it's starting to get under

Castiel's skin. He hears the roar of the mortar coming, and he doesn't know if it's overhead or a half mile away to catch out some other company – he doesn't whether to shout to take cover or to keep going. They've been lucky, their path relatively free, but Castiel is jumpy.

There are German soldiers bursting out of broken-down buildings, and Castiel drops to a knee, tilts his head over to the iron-sights. He squeezes off a shot that punches back his shoulder, then another. He lifts his head to see Inias coming around from the far side of the park, two-platoon spreading out to make themselves smaller targets, and he's about to yell for them to move up this main road towards Charlie Company when a plane comes roaring overhead with a sound to split their eardrums.

Castiel flinches instinctively, hands flying up to protect his head, and even when he sees the stars painted on the underside of the wings he still has that fear in his gut. He takes deep breaths past it.

“Two-platoon, move up – Hester, set down a defensive line up of the church, hold for further orders--” Castiel turns back to call down the formation. “Spangler, on me! Get Virgil on the line.”

“Baker Green, come in, this is Baker Red, hold for the six--”

Spangler passes the radio mouth-piece up to Castiel, and at that moment, a shell comes screaming overhead and Castiel freezes. This time he's not just nervous – this one is real. He shoves past Spangler, leans out into the street, and he yells, “Clear the streets! Get into cover, everyone get out of the--”

The shell explodes through the wall of the building at Castiel's back, and the shock-waves up through his knees nearly bowl him over. Smoke and brick and rubble clatter around him, bounce off his helmet, and he steadies himself. He can hear someone crying for help,

but that's not his job.

Castiel gets the radio and makes contact. One- and four-platoon have not yet linked up with Able Company but are close to their objective – however, there's a fortified German position just ahead of the Penfeld that they're having a lot of trouble clearing. Over the radio, Virgil is calm, but Castiel can hear it in his voice: things are going badly.

Panic begins to make itself known in Castiel's stomach, but he ignores it. He breathes. “We can't send you any further support or our link with Charlie Company this side will break and we don't need two holes in our line. I'll get Able Company to assist – hold the line.”

Castiel does everything he can for the other two platoons and he squashes down the churning anxiety that he is abandoning half his company.

They clear another house, a restaurant with the windows shattered, a store whose foundations groan around them until Castiel is concerned the whole thing is going to come down around them. He calls to fix bayonets, and Baker pushes up through the streets.

There are S-mines set up at the base of the church that Castiel only notices when Quentin has his foot over it, and he yells as Quentin's foot goes down, and by then it's already launching itself high into the air, metal shredding up through the meat and bone of Quentin's calf, and then it explodes. Castiel flinches back, and he's shouting *proven route, follow the proven route* but the road surface is all torn up with shell craters and potholes and Christ, there could be mines everywhere.

They pull back, try another way around, and there at the end of the street are three men with a mortar tripod and a machine-gun that lights up as soon as they come out.

“Get into cover,” Castiel yells, and he drops into a crouch, his back pressed against the wall. “Inias, get your men on a suppressive base of fire – Hester, take them across to the other side and move up fast to take them out--”

Up ahead, the light artillery tripod thuds dully, legs squeaking against the sidewalk, and that's all the warning Castiel gets before the first mortar hits within six feet of him. He throws his arm up over his face, flinches down – *not today, not today, Jesus Christ please* – and then the smoke is settling and he's still here, he's okay. He straightens up, shakes it off.

“Hester, take them over, now!” Castiel yells, as hhe pushes himself up onto one knee, rifle pulled into his shoulder. He fires twice, sees his rounds crack off the wall behind the gunners without effect, and he swears under his breath.

He goes to move, and then he crashes into Harry Spangler crouched just behind him with his radio.

“Sir, Lieutenant Virgil on the line--”

Castiel takes the mouth-piece when Virgil is halfway through a sentence.

“--come in, this is Baker Green, we need reinforcements immediately, Able is unable to send sufficient assistance and we're short on rifle-power, please advise, over.”

Shit. *Shit.* Castiel doesn't know what to do. He presses the mouth-piece tight against his cheek, distracting himself momentarily with the cold

of the metal as he looks out over two- and three-platoon as they adjust formations to press up the road towards the next mortar position. As Castiel watches, Aaron Bass catches a round through the elbow and goes down; another mortar strikes, a little further now as it zeroes on the men moving up, and there is a geyser of thick black smoke with someone screaming in the epicentre. Castiel's fingers tighten on the mouth-piece.

Virgil's voice is still coming through.

“--repeat, this is Baker Green, come in, we're in need of--”

“Roger that, Baker Green, this is the six,” Castiel says, and another shell comes screaming overhead. He doesn't know if it's for them or for someone else, but he flinches back against the wall, and his breath catches in his chest in a moment of fear. “Fuck – sorry – this is the six, do you read me? We have one position to clear and then we'll be coming to assist in full. I'll be sending two-platoon over A.S.A.P, what are your coordinates?”

Castiel passes on orders to three-platoon to stay behind and clear the position, since they're already moving up, and he leaves one squad to maintain a base of fire until the position is clear, and the rest of two-platoon comes with him. Castiel knows his orders are to maintain a perimeter to push in towards the submarine bays, but fuck his orders. If it means he loses half his company in the process, he doesn't give a fuck.

He runs at the back of two-platoon; for a moment, he is in step with Inias, who throws him a grin that is splattered with dirt and soot. “I think it's going pretty well, don't you?”

Castiel shakes his head and keeps going.

One- and four-platoon are a half-mile away at the base of the hill – not far, but it feels like a marathon as Castiel and two-platoon make their way across. It's another hot day, the sun beating down on them, and they are burdened with all their equipment, and Castiel is sweating. His hands are slippery on his rifle.

They are close, and then the air is roaring again with the shell of a railroad gun, and Castiel doesn't know where it's coming from, but the sound of it is building and panic is tightening in his chest. “Take cover--”

It hits fifteen feet in front of him, throws Lance Corporal Hinton flat onto his back. He starts up crying, and then there is Private Callahee grabbing a handful of his clothes to haul him up onto their shoulder, and they keep going. They don't have the time or resources to get him back to a scout car yet.

“Move up, move up,” Castiel yells. “Leave the gun and move up towards the other platoons.” It seems a simple enough order, but the roads of Brest not as straight-forward as Castiel's map would have him believe, and they are cut up by narrow winding alleys that never lead them out where Castiel thinks they will. He would never admit it out loud, but he thinks they might be lost.

Castiel drops to a knee, rips his map out of his breast pocket, and he is calling for Spangler to come over and get the other platoons on the radio while he works out where the fuck they are and where they're meant to be going. Then gunfire is chattering from a high window, and Spangler yelps in pain.

Castiel grabs a fistful of his jacket, yanks him down out of the way, behind a wooden fence, but Spangler is mostly unhurt. He has an angry-looking graze along one side of his face that tears an ugly hole in his ear, but otherwise he's fine.

“Get onto Virgil again, double-check those coordinates,” Castiel orders. He twists on his heel, ducks low behind the fence, and crawls to a point where he can see Inias. “Lieutenant Wallace – get that gunner! He's up in one those third-storeys, get suppressive fire and grenades on him until you can clear the building!”

They get the gunner, and they get the coordinates, and then they're moving again, but every corner they take, as they go deeper into the city, there are bullets bouncing off the walls around them, and the low sound of shells being fired. Mortars crash to earth, kicking up smoke and fire, and Castiel can tell they're close.

He runs hard, pushes himself until the muscles in his calves sting with every step, until he feels his body could outrun his legs until he topples over, and he tries not to think about the clatter of gunfire behind him. There is the thud, and whistle – low and growing louder, building to a shrill sound like the scream of a bird – and the mortar hits. The ground pitches up; his legs cave and he stumbles, bounces his shoulder off a wall – his bad shoulder – and the air is all ripped out of his chest with the pain of it. He staggers, turns, and he presses his back flat against the wall to watch the progress of the men behind him.

He’s yelling, *come on, come on,* but he can’t hear his own voice. He reaches out for the men as they run towards him, for a slap on the back or to grab at a sleeve, something to pull them along, rush them past towards the next point. Donald Hanscum's ankle rolls over and he falls in the dirt, but Corporal Mills and Private Lietz come after, grab an elbow and a handful of combat jacket respectively, yank him up and forwards with his feet skittering inelegantly behind him as he flails to get back up. Castiel’s voice is hoarse in all its roaring silence, *come on, come on,* and as two-platoon comes sprinting across the open ground next, it comes again: thud, whistle. Thud, whistle. And again. And again.

One hits the buildings, sends rubble and glass raining down. One hits

the dirt and throws Castiel back against the brickwork, but he regains his balance, presses in close to the wall as he leans out to shout, *let's go* for two-platoon. He counts the men, some six to eight feet apart the way they've been trained, so that a single arc of fire can't take them all out – Mills and Hanscum, one; Sergeant Garrigan, two; three – a dull noise, thud - four; five – and the high, wailing cry that follows – six; Inias; seven.

Castiel's mouth opens soundlessly again: *take cover.*

The mortar hits.

For several moments, everything falls into a new, wobbly kind of silence that trembles at the edges, gains a high-pitched undertone that shrieks louder and louder as Castiel's hearing comes back, and he sits up in the dirt. His brain swims and he has to adjust. Fuck. Fuck, that was close.

He picks himself up, tries to scream out again for his company – and now he genuinely doesn't know if he's lost the sound of his voice in the thunder and chaos, or if his throat is all clogged up with brick-dust and smoke. "Come on, let's move," he yells, knowing that the mortars are getting closer as the German artillery zeroes in on their coordinates.. They need to get out of here.

A panicked, smoke-raw voice comes screaming out of the swirling dust. "Medic!"

The next men come – two of them, huddled low, and that's when he realises they've each got two hands clenched around the straps of someone's webbing, hauling them behind. Castiel pushes himself off the wall and runs to help, and it's only when he has a hand fisted into Inias' jacket that he realises he's lost his legs.

He doesn't give himself time to think too much about it; he just heaves Inias up and drags him along – and all the while, with Inias complaining in typical fashion: "What the hell are you doing, Cas – you've got shit to do. I'll be fine, I swear, just let me--"

They get him behind the relative safety of the church's remaining wall, kick some rubble and broken bricks to clear a flat space on the ground, and lay him down. Castiel twists around – yells for a medic – and then he looks back to see the rest of two-platoon huddled against the wall and in corners for shelter as they wait for the next move. "Sergeant Garrigan IC, take them around, realign squads with Hester – and Jesus – Spangler, or someone, get a goddamn medic!"

As the men hurry off, Castiel drops to his knees next to Inias, body tilted to protect him from any further fire. The mortars still make their greedy noise from afar, hissing overhead before they bring the city down, but Castiel ignores it. Let them do their worst.

"Fuck," Inias mutters. "Am I okay? Do I still have my balls? Cas, you gotta check, I'm begging you--"

Castiel checks Inias' pulse, which is fast and a little erratic, snaps at him to shut up when he makes some ignorant wise-crack – *well, I wasn't enjoying this war anyway* and *ooh, Cas, talk dirty to me* – and leans back to assess how bad the damage is.

He presses his lips tightly together. Bites back bile.

Private Spangler comes back from further down the wall, radio mouth-piece still in his hand. "They're sending du Mort ASAP, but he's gotta come all the way over from four-platoon—"

Castiel isn't listening; he doesn't have an inch of free space left inside his head for extraneous detail. "Get onto Hester, make sure he knows what he's doing," he rushes out as he sits back on his heels to hitch up his combat jacket, fumbles with his belt until he can roughly yank it out. "We can't afford any more mistakes."

"Ahh, shit," Inias croaks, with some rough approximation of a laugh. "At least maybe I'll get to go home now."

"Stop talking," Castiel snaps; he doesn't have time for Inias' whining, self-indulgent bullshit. "And for Christ's sake, will you lie still?"

Belt around the top of Inias' thigh, three inches up from the amputation, cinches it tight enough that Inias grunts in pain. Castiel glances up with over-expectant hope in the direction of the other platoons, thinking that maybe he'll see Winchester or du Mort running along any second now – no such luck. He started unlacing one of his boots for a second tourniquet.

"Ring into Battalion HQ for the aid centre," Castiel tells Spangler without looking at him, his fingers quick on his boot-laces. "Tell them we're going to need an aid cart for injury transportation – give them our coordinates and say they're going to have come around the north-west road to avoid enemy artillery—"

"Look, it's just a little piece of shrapnel, I swear to you," Inias protests. " Jesus, babe, you got a piece of shrapnel on the first day and you didn't see me making such a—" Whatever it was that Castiel was allegedly making that is so irritating to Inias, he doesn't find out; Inias' voice gets more cracked and harsh until he breaks up into a rattling cough.

Castiel looks up at him, recognising the sound even as he thinks, in blind desperation, that he must be wrong. There is a spot of blood on

Inias' lower lip.

Castiel's mouth falls open; his eyes flash rapidly over Inias' face and torso, searching for the damage. "What are you talking about?"

"Shit, I don't know – I think it got me in one of my legs, maybe, it got me in the chest, it just—"

"Inias, what are you--" Castiel watches Inias limply flailing his hands across his chest, and then he understands. He pushes Inias' feeble hands away, and realises, then, that a dark blossom is spreading across the front of his jacket.

Castiel tears at the zip of his jacket, rips away the fabric even as it causes Inias to flinch and groan aloud, and that's when he sees it – what he should have been focused on the whole time, instead of prioritising the immediately visible.

There is a scattering of small punctures across Inias' T-shirt, each one mangling blood and fabric, metal and flesh; each pulses faintly, spreading the stain. One hole is more of a slash, the length of a finger; another would be no larger than the head of a pin, and yet is the source of the most blood. It looks as though his chest has been crushed.

Castiel doesn't know what to say. For a moment, his mind is completely blank, and it's all he can do to lift his eyes to once again meet Inias'. He whispers, "Inias."

Then it does sink in, albeit slowly: he's going to lose Inias. He's going to lose Inias.

“Shit,” he says.

He’s going to lose Inias.

He lifts his hands up from Inias’ chest for a moment, turns his palms towards himself and sees that they are wet with fresh blood. A dark droplet trickles the length of his thumb, down the lines of his palm, into the crease of his wrist. How was he supposed to know that there was something else wrong? He's not a fucking medic. He doesn't know how to do this. He didn't know that he should patted him down for other injuries. He doesn't know what to do.

“Shit,” he says again, louder now, and he looks up for a moment, meeting Spangler’s eyes – as wide and fearful as his own must be – and then he twists around to yell for a medic until his voice cracks.

Then, to Private Spangler: “Quick, help me put pressure on it.”

Castiel hitches up the hem of Inias’ shirt – a low, strained cry bursting from Inias’ mouth as they do so, the fabric of it tearing and pulling on his wound – and he and Spangler press down hard on the centre of his chest, where the majority of the injury seems to be. Something shifts underneath Castiel’s hands, something hard, and for a split-second vomit pitches up into Castiel’s throat – he’s touching bone, he’s moving torn muscle in the hollow cavern of Inias’ chest – but he fights it, swallows the bitter taste down.

He digs in his webbing for the small first-aid kit that every infantryman is supplied with, but its area of attack is blisters and heatstroke. The small roll of bandaging it provides is hardly useful now; Castiel bundles it into a mass and presses down hard.

Inias’ mouth opens to make some noise, a scream or cry, but nothing

comes out save a thick gloss of fresh blood that spills down his chin. “Cas,” he manages through it, his teeth stained red. “Fuckin’ butcher, Cas, don’t – Jesus—”

Castiel eases up, his arms slackening. “What do I do, Inias?” he says. “Tell me what to do.”

Spangler has his blood-darkened hands on the radio receptor again. “Sir, word is that du Mort’s been held up by shelling, there’s no word from Winchester—”

Inias’ face is losing colour; he is turning grey at the edges like old paper. “Fuck, *fuck*.”

“Tell me what to do, Inias,” Castiel urges again, not caring for the way his voice pitches up and cracks. “Tell me what to – fuck, Inias – *medic!”* Inias is not going to give him answers. Castiel turns instead for the smoke and dust route that their company disappeared down, and he yells himself hoarse. “Somebody get me a fucking medic!”

He doesn’t make it.

Something breaks inside Inias and within minutes he has bled his five litres into his own internal organs. He doesn’t get any real last words either, except for some incoherent complaining to Castiel as he coughs and vomits and spasms. If ‘*fuck’* counts as a last word, Castiel guesses that’s it. It seems somewhat mundane, if appropriate.

Castiel looks up at Spangler; Harry looks back at him with an open mouth. They don’t have a word to say to each other. On Spangler’s back, the radio squeals and crackles, and word comes through.

Spangler breaks away then, rocks back onto a knee in order to stabilise the radio signal, and listens in. Then he's back, speaking to Castiel – *sir, sir, sir* – and Castiel looks at Inias.

It strikes him, for the first time, that he is a very long way from home.

Spangler tries again, and again, with growing hesitation. "Sir?"

With a blink, Castiel realises that he is being spoken to.

"Of course," he says, words slightly slurred like he's speaking through glass. "Yes – tell them--"

He speaks into the radio – commands, questions, orders for conditionals and what to do when, if, and. Report back when. On the other channel, Major Campbell is trying to get in touch with orders relating movements with the 175th. The entire countryside is on the move; the earth pitches beneath them.

It's time to go.

He digs into the blood-wet collar of Inias' shirt, fishes out his dog-tags, and pulls hard. There is a clink like coins together, and it comes free.

Castiel wipes a thumb over his mouth.

Word comes through that three-platoon made all the difference and that the position at the Penfeld has been taken care of. The platoons move up through Recouvrance again. Through Le Quatre Moulins,

taking out snipers in high building with quick, methodical mortar deployment. Through the blockades of German infantry men. Someone in Castiel's squad hurls a grenade and the enemy scatter. This is Castiel's platoon now. He takes them east.

Most of Brest is decimated, bricks and rubble and smoke, and there is the roar of Brewsters overhead. There is opposition, still. Some. There is hand-to-hand combat around the base of a old stone church, and there is the hard kick of Castiel's rifle back into his shoulder as he fires into a dense pack of German men huddled around an artillery gun.

Baker Company is splintered, two platoons making their way south along the river where they were tangled with the 115th, the other two pushing straight through the middle. They don't stop – for water, for food, for a rest. They have to keep going.

A man in second squad takes a round to the eye and is thrown back sharply against the cobbles. They take out an abandoned railroad gun with a stick of Comp B. The passage between two crumbling buildings is spiked with S-mines, and a replacement from first squad loses his leg below his knee. The sun is high and hot. The platoon keeps going.

Word from two-platoon's radioman is that the 175th have cleared almost everything north-east of the Penfeld, and the British crocodile tanks are in play along just short of the ruined bridge. It's good news. The 116th are making good progress.

They have to keep going. The air is cooling as it comes up to sixteen-hundred-hours, and Corporal Mills keeps trying to say things that are difficult to understand.

“Sir, we've got in touch with the Item Company CO from the 115th's 3rd Battalion, they're saying this area's all cleared up around here. Our perimeter is solid and we're past our objective. We should slow down

a minute, give a men a break, and we could try to hook up again with the other platoons."

"There's light artillery down the far end of the road threatening our position, sir, how should we proceed?"

"Sir, I've got Lieutenant Virgil on the radio here for you – one-platoon is less than a mile from our position now, so we can link up with them or we can bring them down to us. What should we do, sir?"

"Lieutenant Novak, sir, I've got battalion staff on the line wanting a status update. How should I report?"

Castiel sits down. He is looking at his hands.

"Sir." It's Johnny Mills. "Permission to set down the platoon here and await the rest of the company?"

Castiel nods.

Mills walks away. Castiel is having trouble focusing. There is a dull ringing in his ears and his head doesn't feel right. He feels unsolid. He feels as though something is pinning his feet to the floor and the rest of his body is untethered. His hands. He needs to keep moving his hands.

"Sir, four-platoon are coming up from Kervichen way. Should we extend our all-round defensive or should we wait for them to arrive?"

“Here, sir.”

“Lieutenant, Major Campbell wants a status report. He's on line one.”

“Sir, we've been positioned here for a while now – permission to take a recon patrol outside of our perimeter?”

“Sir.”

There is a metal mug of coffee in Castiel's hand. He doesn't remember how he got it. He lifts it to his mouth, and the coffee is cold.

Two-platoon has settled at the side of the road, by a hotel whose front has fallen in. Men sit on heaps on rubble, or on partially-fallen walls, or on the ground, and they talk amongst themselves. Their voices are loud, echoing, sharp. Gunfire clatters in the background.

Castiel has a tremor through one hand.

It comes and it goes, and he watches the way the surface of his coffee trembles in his hands. His fingers judder, beyond his control, and then there is the shift of bone, tendon, muscle, under the skin. He keeps watching the pattern of it. The shaking fingers, the fleeting movement of metacarpals. There is blood engrained into the whorls and cracks of his hand. The bones in the back of his hand move like piano keys. He breathes, in and out, unsteady, and he realises that Inias is dead.

Castiel's breath catches.

He stares at the blood on his hands, and he feels something constrict in his chest until he feels as though he's having trouble breathing.

It doesn't make sense to him. Inias can't die. They've been best friends since they were eight years old. They joined the army together. After the war is over, he and Inias go back to Bedford together. Inias meets a nice girl and marries her and has fat, happy children, and Castiel is the uncle, the close family friend, the military man who brings them presents and teaches them about math and science. Castiel writes speeches for Inias' wedding. He makes fun of him when he gets old and tired and needs a walking stick – but none of this works if Inias doesn't go back to Bedford, and it doesn't make sense. If Inias dies, the rest of Castiel's life is planned out all wrong and he doesn't know what to do.

He can't breathe. There is something wrong and he can't breathe.

Castiel doesn't realise how badly his hands are shaking until coffee starts to spill over his fingers. He sets the mug down on the ground, unsteadily; he knocks it over. Coffee puddles out over the asphalt.

He takes off his helmet.

In the distance, there is the faint sound of men coming up the road towards their position. Footsteps, and voices, and the dull sound of metal on metal as equipment is moved. The rumbling of a scout car. Castiel can hear all of it – louder than usual, and harsh inside his head so that every noise is sharp and aching and rattles inside his head like his brain is coming apart into over-bright shards of glass.

There is Dean's voice.

Castiel breathes. He breathes. He clenches his hands into fists so tight

that he can feel his fingernails cut into his palms.

"--and I swear to you, there was Joe, and Joe's German must be about as good as mine is – and he was yelling at him, *lower your weapon, lower your weapon*, and the guy doesn't speak a fuckin' word of English either, and he's yelling back in German, and it's a fucking trainwreck, honestly – and that's when Frank comes in, and he says--"

Castiel is not in control of his body. He is not entirely entirely conscious of what he's doing, but he's up on his feet and he is moving.

"--yeah, so then, as usual, Frank's going, *shoot him, just fucking shoot him*, and I don't have a weapon, obviously, so I'm like, *with what?* Yeah, I know, I'm hilarious, only the thing is--"

His fists are clenched tight at his sides. He is breathing unsteadily.

"--and that's when finally Callahee comes in, and God bless Callahee for translating, I swear to God, because--" Dean cuts himself off. "Sir."

Castiel can't look at him. He has his eyes trained on the front of Dean's jacket, and he can't look up for anything because there is something tight and shaking inside Castiel's chest that wants to be let out. His vision is trembling violently at the edges, and he has that ringing echo inside his ears, and Dean is front of him breathing easy as anything. Castiel drags in a deep breath and he says, "Where the hell have you been?", but his words come out wrong – a hoarse, shaky whisper, no authority to them.

Dean is silent for a moment, and a small part of Castiel's brain registers the dirt and blood smeared across Dean's skin – he's been doing his job, he's been elsewhere – but all Castiel can think about is the blood on his own hands, under his fingernails. Then Dean just

says, “What?”

Slowly, Castiel lifts his eyes to Dean's, and there's what he wanted. Now, finally, Dean is afraid of him.

Castiel repeats himself, louder this time. His voice is a snarl in his throat. “Where the *fuck* have you been?”

If the rest of the company weren't watching before, they are now. Bewildered, Dean glances from Castiel to Harvelle and back again, as though seeking help. “I was with three-platoon – you moved us ahead to relieve one- and four-platoon,” Dean says hesitantly, and he frowns. “I’m sorry, sir, what’s—?”

“I see,” Castiel says quietly, his voice cold and even now. He breathes slowly, keeps himself steady. His hands are shaking. “Du Mort was in four-platoon, and you moved up with three-platoon. In a company of just under one hundred men, with four companies, you were both down by the Penfeld. Why is that?”

Castiel can feel himself shaking, and he can’t stop; his breath is coming ragged, like he’s ten seconds from debilitating panic, and his stomach is caught up in a whirlwind, pitching and turning over in his fury. He wants to throw up. Inias is dead and he’s going to vomit in front of his entire company, while Dean looks on all startled and confused, and of course, innocent as ever, because Dean never does anything wrong. Dean is perfect. Dean can do whatever he fucking wants without consequence, because Dean is invincible; he doesn’t need to pay attentions to the needs of ordinary men. He is so much more important than that, and simple things – *little, simple things* like keeping soldiers alive – is so far beneath him.

“Why is that?” Castiel says again, beginning to raise his voice. “Is it because you were needed – or because the majority of your personal

friends are in one-platoon?"

"Sir, I—"

Castiel takes another step closer, right into Dean's personal space, and this is the point, usually, where Castiel would kiss him. He would touch his face, cradle his jaw in his hands, if he was feeling brave, and the rest of Normandy would fade and dwindle in a blissful, albeit temporary insignificance. Castiel is not thinking about kissing Dean. If he had less self-control, he would hit him, swing a hundred and eighty pounds of his anger and guilt at Dean until he was black in the face and begging for Castiel to stop. Castiel wants to. He wants to break him.

He's shaking. It's been many years since Castiel was young and stupid enough to give in to the familiar flare of rage and beat the living shit out of someone, but he's close now. He breathes through his teeth, and he says, "This may come as something of a revelation to you, but we're in a goddamn war-zone." Castiel breathes. He breathes – steady now, steady. His blood-stained knuckles are itching for bone. "While you're having the time of your life braiding Corporal Harvelle's hair, men are getting hit," he spits out, and his voice is pitching up in volume and accusation with every word, against his better judgement, "and men are dying – and all because you don't think to be around when people need you!"

Dean recoils back, eyes wide with an expression that falls somewhere between shock and anger. "All due respect, sir," he bites out, "but one- and four- were being heavily shelled and under a lot of pressure, there were—"

"Are you arguing with me?" Castiel demands.

Dean balks. He exhales sharply; sets his jaw. At last now, some months

into their acquaintance, he finally knows better than to answer that. He just stares back at Castiel, looking sullen.

“I am not interested in your justifications, Winchester,” Castiel snarls. “I want to make this perfectly clear: I should not have to waste my time trying to fix casualties. I don’t have the training, I don’t have the knowledge – that’s not what I’m paid for. I do my fucking job, sergeant – when the fuck are you going to start doing yours?”

Dean’s eyes narrow. He doesn’t respond, not verbally; he just comes slowly to attention, to acknowledge what Castiel has said, and then sets a hard gaze just over Castiel’s shoulder. He doesn’t move from that position until Castiel has turned away.

A harsh silence has fallen over the entire company, and he feels a hundred eyes on him as he walks through where the rest of the men are seated or standing, taking on cigarettes, snacks, and stagnant water as they rest before the next move. Castiel's eyes move over them, man to man, and he doesn't take any of it in.

He is disoriented, and something is pulsing hotly inside his skull, and no matter how tight he clenches his fists, he can't get rid of the need to hit something. He needs to get as far as possible from Dean, right now, because if he stays here a second longer he's going to lose it, and really lose it, and Dean may be taller, heavier, but if Castiel goes for him now, he doesn't know that anyone will be able to stop him before he fucking kills him.

Castiel walks away fast. He doesn't know where he's going. He doesn't know that he isn't going to walk into enemy fire and take a bullet through the eye, but all that matters now is that he gets far away from here.

From behind him, Castiel distantly hears Dean speaking to some of the

other infantrymen. “What the hell is his problem?”

“I don't know, man. Bad day, maybe. I think Lieutenant Wallace got hit – they were friends, right?”

And then: “Oh shit. Is he okay?”

Castiel turns the corner. He isn't far enough, but he can't go any further.

He thinks his knees are going to buckle beneath him, and there is blood on his hands. He has blood in his mouth. The world is closing in on itself until panic is his in his throat, and everything else is pitching in his gut – Inias is dead – and he can't breathe – Inias is dead – and then he stumbles, and then he vomits onto the cobblestones. He vomits until he dry-heaves, and he has a hand on the crumbling wall of an old hotel to keep himself upright, and the touch of his hand on the loose brick feels as far away as Bedford.

Chapter 12: Siegfriedstellung

Chapter Notes

I want to mention upfront that I am a white person, and this chapter includes Cas meeting a couple of guys from the 333rd Field Artillery Battalion, which was an all-black WW2 unit, and it is probably kind of uncomfortable. The US military was deeply racist in the 1940s, with racially-segregated units, and I don't want to shy away from/brush over how awful things were for black people, especially black Americans, during this era, but I also didn't want to just go 'oh well, the units were segregated, too bad, guess this means I just straight-up won't have ANY black people in this whole fic', and I also wanted to address the fact that all the accomplishments of black WW2 units were overshadowed, or ignored, or belittled, but that they play an enormous part in the war. However, I'm writing this fic as realistically as possible, and so I don't feel like it's fair or realistic for me to pretend like all my White Main Character Faves wouldn't have been super duper racist, because they would have been, and I certainly don't want to make Castiel some kind of weird Benevolent White Saviour either. I have tried to write sensitively, and I have tried to make it as clear as possible in the narrative that, in spite of Castiel's actions, I do not in any way condone or excuse his behaviour, but I want to make sure it's clear here as well, and I would just ask that if anyone reads through that scene and thinks that I've constructed it in a way that frames Castiel's actions as The Right Thing, or that it's problematic/racist in some other way, then please, please, please come forwards and let me know so that I can do better!

Also, in other warnings: there is another moment of strong interpersonal violence at the end of the chapter that might be uncomfortable for some people, so just!! Watch out for that.

18th September, 1944

Dear Sam,

So there's good news and there's bad news, I guess. Good news is we won. We've been going after this one city for what feels like as long as I can remember, weeks and months, and we're finally here. This morning the

four officers in charge of the forces holding out on us came out and surrendered, and after that the whole thing was ours. We must've had to process a thousand guys all coming out with their hands up, it was insane. The bad news is it cost us a whole lot, too. We lost a lot of good people on the way in. Lieutenant Wallace is dead. Not my platoon-leader, but a good guy, even if I didn't know him that well. And he's Novak's best friend, too – was. Shit. The poor bastard's gotta write out the letter home as well. It's fucking shitty, Sam, it's really fucking shitty. Wallace was popular, anyway, so a lot of guys in the company are pretty cut up about it, only of course they're all pretending like it doesn't matter. Like hell. It fucking matters.

Shit, I'm sorry. This letter wasn't supposed to go like this. I was gonna talk about Jess, I was gonna tell you some shitty French joke that Joe heard off some of the girls here – I wasn't gonna go off a big tangent about this, I said I wasn't. But it was bad, Sam, I saw Novak after. And he was there with him when it happened, and Christ, you should have seen him. And he was having a hard time as it is and – I mean, of course, he's my CO. I have to be worried. Plus, I'm a medic. I gotta look after him.

Anyway. It's fine. It's all fine. I'm glad you had a good time with Jess' family – I told you there was nothing to worry about! It even seems like her dad liked you, which is a big plus, trust me. He didn't try to stage an accident for you or anything, so well done! And don't say that about dad. Okay, I know we're not some perfect apple pie Colorado family like some people, but that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with him, or us, and she won't stop being stuck on you just because dad's giving her a hard time. She sounds tough – she can handle him. Probably better than you can, at least. Don't sweat it. Dad'll come around eventually.

Take care of yourself. You let me know about that paper as soon as you get word back, you hear? I got guys here bugging me to know whether you passed and as nice as it is, you're stealing all my thunder. I'll talk to you soon. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

20th September, 1944

For the first time in months, Castiel has a space all to his own, and he doesn't know what to do with it.

The German generals' headquarters are set deep in a hill overlooking the sea, with more than a hundred rooms equipped as staff rooms, officers' quarters, command posts; there are hot showers, and vast mess facilities, and there are orderlies and maids and cooks – all French, and all keen to do anything in their power to thank the American soldiers for liberating the city. From what Castiel understands, some of the female orderlies have been very liberally expressing their gratitude. To say that the accommodation behind Brest's U-boat pens are luxurious is an understatement.

His quarters are small and simple – he's only a company commander, after all – but it's more than he could have ever dreamed of. He sits on the edge of the bed and he looks out the window at the sea. He feels bone-tired.

There comes a knock on the door. Castiel doesn't get up. “Enter.”

The door creaks open, and Gabriel comes striding in. “Hey, Sleeping Beauty, shake a leg. You're gonna miss breakfast.” He pauses at the end of Castiel's bed, pulls an impressed face. “Shit, that's a hell of a view. Mine's half blocked by the fucking U-boat pen.”

“We can swap if you want.”

“Nah, it's okay. Now come on, let's get breakfast.” Gabriel drums two hands on the walls; Castiel doesn't mean to flinch. Gabriel lowers his

hands. “Let's go, Novak. Look alive.”

Castiel hauls himself to his feet and follows Gabriel out. There is a long flight of concrete steps up away from their quarters that brings them approximately level with the top of the hill, and then on their left there is the mess hall. A queue snakes around the corner and down the hallway as men wait for their turn to go in, battalions each scheduled a forty-five minutes in which to eat, company by company. Gabriel and Castiel reach the queue as the tail-end of Fox Company is going in, so there's no sense in cutting the line, as would usually be officers' prerogative. They join the back and slowly file around.

Gabriel is saying something to Castiel, his voice light and easy, but Castiel isn't listening. He follows the queue as it drags forwards. He moves, left foot, right. He remembers to breathe.

Gabriel's tone is a rise and fall, tilting up at the end, and Castiel realises he's being asked a question. “Yeah,” he says. “Sure.”

“You have no idea what I just asked.”

Distractedly, Castiel hums a kind of lethargic agreement to whatever Gabriel is saying, and he looks down the line for how much further it is. He's not hungry, but he feels like he needs to be doing something. Anything is better than this waiting.

They go in. They get sloppy scrambled eggs and indeterminable meat in a faintly brown sauce, and Gabriel leads them over to the officers' mess, to a table with a couple of men that Castiel knows, plus a few that he doesn't. There are some of the commanders of the other 2nd Battalion companies – Reagan, Cain, Azazel – and there are men who he guesses must have been delayed in their 1st Battalion mess hours. Castiel finds a place on the bench and puts his tray down opposite Cain.

Gabriel gets into the conversation immediately, starting something up in a high-pitched and ridiculous voice that Castiel supposes is comedic, and most of the officers start laughing as Gabriel settles onto the bench amongst them. Castiel sits on the end and, slowly, he starts to eat.

He does half-listen, to his credit. Gabriel is talking about how many times he has already walked in on one of his men having sex with one of the French dames in the two days since Brest was liberated; they move on to discuss whether girls here are actually better-looking than back in America, or if they've just become hyper-sensitive to female attractiveness in the months they've been trapped in an all-male environment; Azazel makes some depressing predictions about pregnancy rates sky-rocketing in Brest in the next few weeks. Castiel hears their laughter as though through glass.

He eats in silence. He forces himself through each mouthful even when the lukewarm slime of the undercooked scrambled egg feels like blood in his mouth. He chews, and swallows, and he concentrates on keeping it down.

The table's chatter is briefly broken up by the arrival of First Lieutenant Naomi, commander of Able Company, and for a minute everything is taken up in greeting him. The only space left is beside Castiel, and Naomi sets his tray down carefully next to him. Castiel shifts up infinitesimally to make room. Naomi is alright – he can be annoying, and he has his proclivities towards obsessive rule-following, in particular a strict adherence to the US Military dress code, but he's alright. Castiel can imagine worse company COs to follow.

“Morning,” Naomi says with a smile. “How is everyone today?”

“Can't complain – although I do want to--”

“You can't be serious. We have hot showers here. I'm don't know about you, but I'm living the high life--”

“Okay, Laufeyson, but you don't have a piece of metal in your side--”

“Whiners get shit. Repeat after me. Whiners get--”

Naomi glances around the table, his face settled into its usual expression of calm politeness, and as Gabriel argues with Azazel about the pros versus the cons of surviving a shelling, Naomi's eyes fall at last on Castiel, who can't help but feel like a chastised pupil. “Castiel,” Naomi says pleasantly. “How are you doing?”

Castiel gives a curt nod. He keeps his eyes on his food. “Fine, thank you.”

Across the table, Cain makes a small noise around his scrambled eggs food, and he makes a face that pulls the corners of his mouth down in a gesture that falls just short of sympathetic. “Not what I heard.”

Castiel lifts his eyes to meet Cain's, expression carefully blank. “Then please, enlighten me.” he says. “How am I doing?”

Cain swallows his mouthful of food, perfectly casual. “I heard you broke down in Recouvrance.”

“Whoa, Jesus,” Gabriel exclaims. “Come on, Cain. The hell is wrong with you?”

Castiel takes a deep breath. “I lost my temper,” he says evenly. He ignores Gabriel; he can take care of himself. He has never needed any help picking his fights. He opts instead to keep his gaze steady on Cain. “I'm aware that it was unprofessional conduct, but you can rest assured it won't happen again. Now--” and he sets his fork down, lets it click sharply against the table surface, “--is there any other part of my performance as Baker's commanding officer for which you'd like justification of my actions? Just last week I called for punitive measures as a result of insubordination within my men. I can clarify my thoughts on that as well, if you want.”

Cain's smile grows wider. He twirls a fork through his food. “No, I'm sure you had your reasons. I do trust your judgement, Castiel. After all, this is just one thing. It isn't like you've set a precedent or anything. See, if you'd lost a platoon, maybe – that'd be a problem. But you, of course, you're fine.”

Castiel stares at him. He breathes, slow and steady, and he tells himself that this doesn't qualify as a threat. They can judge him, they can think him unfit for the position, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. “See?” he says, at last. He can hear that his own voice sounds hollow. “Fine. As I said.” He picks up his fork again. “I'm glad we agree.”

He's no longer looking at Cain to see how his expression changes, but Castiel can hear him make a dismissive noise in the back of his throat, something close to a laugh, and then the table is quiet. Castiel wants to say something more – perhaps to point out how long exactly Cain has been company commander, since Major Isaacs was only killed at La Trinité, and that it is easy to be judgemental when so far he has lead them through only a single assault, and that maybe when he's actually done something to earn his bars he will have the right to look down on Castiel's command – but he doesn't say anything. He knows he is doing badly. He knows that most of his platoon leaders don't like him, or want his job, or both. He's fighting a losing battle, and he doesn't have the energy.

He takes another mouthful of his food, but he's not hungry. It tastes ashy on his tongue.

As Gabriel starts up some new conversation with the other officers, Castiel looks out vacantly across the mess hall. He's not interested in talking about how The Andrews Sisters might be touring Paris and Reims; he's not interested in small-talk with men who have for the most part thought he was useless ever since he got off the boat. Truth be told, he's not interested in talking to anyone, on a personal level, about anything. He never thought he would say this, but he wishes he were back in combat. Here, he feels numb, extraneous, like a spare part rattling about in the system until someone takes the whole thing apart to figure out what is wrong.

Slowly, his eyes come into focus, and he realises that he is staring across the room at Corporal Mills – who, thankfully, has not yet noticed. Castiel blinks, and he goes to look away, and that's when he catches Dean's eye.

Dean is two seats down from Mills, wedged into a space far too small for him between Bradbury and Tran, with his shoulders bunched up and his elbows on the table. He looks cleaner than Castiel has seen him in some time; his hair is almost blonde, unevenly bleached by the sunlight. His smile falters as he sees Castiel, then fades.

Castiel looks away first.

He swirls his fork slowly through his food, churning meat and eggs up into a blur. He doesn't want to eat anymore.

“--but come on, is there any way to prove you've got a bust-up ear-drum? Is there? That's all I'm saying,” Gabriel declares, voice loud and obnoxious. “If there's real evidence, I'll buy it, but until there is, I'm saying he bought his way out.”

“There has to be real evidence, otherwise they wouldn't have declared him 4F,” Lieutenant Naomi points out, pedantic as ever.

“Bribery. Bribery is what it is. Sinatra's got more money than sense, he could do it. Honest to God, I bet he--”

Castiel doesn't know what is happening with this conversation, and he doesn't care to find out. “Please, excuse me,” he says quietly, eyes on his tray, and then he stands. He takes his tray with him to deposit in the window along the far wall, and then he walks out. Dean doesn't follow him – a move that is surprising, but not entirely unanticipated.

Outside, the sunlight is hot and fierce, September giving its best before the cold sweeps in to snatch summer away, and Castiel stands for a moment on the front step of the mess hall, face scrunched up against the brightness of it. Slowly, his eyes adjust. The rubble comes more distinctly into view.

There are some things that Castiel recalls about the final push through Brest. He remembers the chaos of his company being splintered between German forces. He remembers the roar of the British Lancaster bombers overhead. He remembers coming along the main road to dusty silence. He remembers a shaky approximation of the Star-Spangled Banner on a piano found in the rubble, French civilians emerging nervously from their hiding places. Castiel isn't sure this feels like a victory.

He picks his way past through the broken stone and upturned cobbles, and he makes his way down towards Battalion CP. He ducks his head through the low doorway, and then palms his helmet off as he comes to stand at attention before Major Singer, the only member of Battalion Staff currently present.

Singer eyes him as though he's considering whether to put out Castiel's eyes if he tries to salute, but Castiel knows better than that by now. Singer doesn't like formalities. Castiel just comes out with it: “Is there any further administrative work I can help with, sir?”

Major Singer huffs. “I'm gonna be frank with you, Novak. No.”

That can't be right. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I'm sure. We've been here two days and you've done everything already. Unless you wanna write me up a report on your company's bowel movements next--”

“Will that be necessary?” Castiel asks.

Singer almost laughs. “No, but it'll get you outta my hair for a while at least, so it ain't nothing.”

Castiel wants to fidget, uncomfortable, but he fights the urge down. He stays straight-backed, chin-lifted. “Sir, there must be something I can--”

“There isn't,” Singer interrupts. “Christ. Just relax. You've got a while off the line – take advantage of it. You know, they're thinking about offering furloughs to England. Apply for that. Or, I don't know, they've opened a movie tent down by 3rd Battalion, go watch *Swing Time.*”

“I've seen *Swing Time*,” Castiel says stiffly.

“It's a good movie,” Singer says, voice flat. “Go see it again.”

Castiel swallows.

Singer folds his hands together on top of the papers on his desk and leans forwards, his eyes hard as he holds Castiel's gaze. “Alright. Let me put this as plain as I can, princess, because I seem to be phrasing this too delicate for you. Are you ready? Here: quit bothering me for more work.”

“Yes, sir,” Castiel says.

“Okay? Because, see, the more work you do, the more work I have to do, and I for one would like to actually use this time to relax,” Singer goes on. “So, please, lieutenant. Get a hobby.”

“Yes, sir.”

Singer sits back in his chair and starts to rifle through his papers again. He speaks without looking up. “Apply for that furlough, Novak. It'll do you some good to get out of here.”

“Yes, sir.” Castiel stands still and waits it to be dismissed. It's only when several long moments have passed in which Castiel watches Major Singer flip through reports, when Singer glances pointedly up at him, that Castiel realises he was dismissed a long time ago. “Sir,” he says again, awkwardly, as a kind of acknowledgement that he should already be gone, and then he turns to leave.

He goes out into the sun again, and for several long seconds he just stands there, watching the dust rise in slow spirals from the brick and

the metal churned up on the other side of the road. There is a lopsided sign that still stands, just off to the left of the heaped-up rubble: *école maternelle.* A stooped woman removes rubble, brick by brick, with her bare hands, a handkerchief knotted over her face. Castiel watches her for a moment, and he wants to help, but he doesn't. He was one of the men who called the shells down.

He goes to watch *Swing Time,* and he stares straight through the screen. Dimly, he can hear the men around him cat-call and wolf-whistle. For the first time, he doesn't try to interest himself in the slim line of Ginger Roger's leg as her dress flares up.

The sharp clatter of tap shoes rings out faster and faster, over floorboards and staircases as they twirl and spin, and the hard chattering sound drills through Castiel's skull. He doesn't even consciously recognise that it sounds like machine-gun fire, and then he finds himself sitting alone in the darkened theatre with deep grooves in his palms from fingernails digging in tight, sweat cold and sticky at the backs of his knees. He doesn't remember the end of the movie. He doesn't remember *The Way You Look Tonight.*

Castiel sits there a couple seconds longer. The movie screen is dark and still, and the room is quiet, with no trace of the world outside. He doesn't enjoy the silence for long; it starts to feel like the lull before an ambush. He gets up.

The time is just past thirteen-hundred hours. Castiel doesn't know what to do with the remaining hours in the day, or the day after. He goes back to his quarters, because at least there he has his schedule and his paperwork and he can find something to fill his time.

He sits at his desk, and looks over his schedule, scribbled out on a scrap piece of paper – *1400: 1P + 2P weapons cleaning (inspection 1445), 3P + 4P free – 1500 3P + 4P calisthenics, 1P maps/nav, 2P short orders drill – 1600* – and he glances over at the list where he has written out what needs doing in terms of administration. There is only

one thing there that hasn't been crossed off.

Castiel stares at *Lieutenant Wallace* until his vision blurs.

He's not doing that now.

He picks up his pencil, pulls his paper towards him, and he starts writing out company names again, checking for oversights in platoon structure, whether anyone needs to be moved. Not more than a week ago, Castiel had been toying with the idea of trying to replace Alistair, but now that they're one officer down, that's impossible. Charles Shurley will be getting demoted down from executive officer to fill the position, which seems less than ideal, seeing as Lieutenant Shurley was specifically given a quick promotion because he was terrible in the field, and, most crucially, because he knew some significant people – but there's nothing Castiel can do about that now. He can reassign team leaders, get Shurley as strong a platoon as possible to minimise damage, but that's all.

As Castiel just gets to writing out the names of two-platoon, the door creaks tentatively open – no knock – and Castiel knows by gut-instinct that it's Dean. He can hear the slow, rolling way he walks, the slight shuffle of his weight. Castiel doesn't look at him. “You're not allowed in here,” he says.

“Oh. Shit.” Dean fidgets for a moment in the doorway. “Sorry – uh, permission to enter?”

Castiel stares down at his paperwork, bounces his pencil in his hand as though he can’t even be bothered to give Dean the time of day, let alone pay attention to whatever he has to say. “Denied.”

Dean makes an exasperated noise in the back of his throat. “Sir,

please, I just want to—”

“You're dismissed.” Castiel speaks flatly, without inflection. He keeps his eyes on his paper.

Dean is floored by that for a moment; he doesn't immediately answer. When he speaks, his voice is quiet. “Lieutenant, all I want to say is that I'm--”

Sorry. Dean is going to say that he's sorry, and something clenches tight and angry in Castiel's chest. He doesn't want to hear it. “I said, you're dismissed, sergeant,” he snaps, and that's when he makes the mistake of meeting Dean's eyes.

Castiel isn't expecting the way that Dean looks devastated, his face crumpled at the mouth and brow, and in the split-second before Dean blinks hard, reins himself back in, Castiel feels his stomach turn over. There is a slow trembling somewhere through his body and the calculated, hard composure he has carried since Recouvrance weighs heavy on his shoulders now. He feels it press in on him like he is being squeezed breathless. He feels it tighten until his ribs crack.

“Yeah,” Dean says, and he takes an unsteady step back. He rubs a hand down over his mouth. “Yeah, sorry. I must've misheard you the first time.”

As though from far away, Castiel hears himself say, “Close the door behind you on your way out.” His voice sounds cold; Castiel can hear the tremor underneath. He looks down at his papers, jaw pulled tight and breathing even, and the letters swim in front of his eyes until he can't read them anymore.

There is the slow shuffle of Dean's footsteps, and then the door clicks

closed behind him. Castiel picks up his pencil.

Dean leaves in his a wake a silence so heavy that Castiel feels he can barely breathe with it pressing in around him. He writes out the names of his soldiers with an unsteady hand.

21 st September, 1944

They need to pull back. There is blood on his hands and the salt of it inside his mouth, and again and again there is the choked, watery splutter of lungs slowly filling with it, and there is blood on his hands and Castiel is awake with a gasp.

For several moments, Castiel can only lie there, breathing ragged, with his pulse so loud in his ears that it seems to vibrate through the ground beneath him, and he waits for it to stop. It's just coming up to oh-two-thirty, and it's still dark out. There is a thin sheen of sweat to his upper lip and the back of his neck.

He breathes in through his nose; out through his mouth.

He is on his back on the floor, his quarters dark and quiet, with his blanket tangled around his legs. At his back, the concrete is cold through the thin fabric of his shirt. He holds onto that feeling – the cold, the slight ache of his back – and he breathes. He counts down from fifty, and then he gets up. He knows by now there's no use trying to get back to sleep.

Castiel's uniform is laid out on the bed, trousers neatly folded so that he can pretend some semblance of a crease will be there in the morning. He almost kept them on in the night, feeling too exposed without them, in case he has to jump up in the middle of the night to take a patrol or lead an assault or defend his men, and God forbid he not have his boots on – but he's not in the field now. The bed is too

ridiculously soft, but he can take his clothes off to go to sleep. He can relax now.

He dresses quickly, eyes on the floor, and he pulls up his rifle from the floor. He unloads it, and passes the sling over his shoulder. He sits on the edge of his bed. There is the window, wide and steel-reinforced, and there is the dark shape of British naval ships in the distance with their lamps turned out. It is nowhere near morning, and his skin is cold with sweat.

Castiel passes the hours before reveille with reviewing after-action reports, and map study. He changes his socks, and rubs at the soles of his feet to will blood and colour back into them after so long never taking off his boots. He stretches, wincing through the pain as he pulls his weak shoulder. He does press-ups until his elbows shake, and tries to force his bad shoulder to get used to the exertion. It doesn't work; it just gives him a headache. By the time oh-five-hundred is drawing close, there is a sharp point in the centre of Castiel's skull that aches, and his bad arm is cramping up, and he wants more than anything to sleep.

Outside, when he leaves his quarters, the morning is quiet and still, the sky white and hazy, overcast. There are small clusters of supply staff heading towards the mess hall to start putting on breakfast, and administrative men moving crates of rations, field equipment, ammunition, from one building to another. Down one road that branches off to the left, Castiel can see two stooped old men working together to heave away chunks of rubble the size of their heads. Castiel stands there a while, hands in his pockets, and watches them, body feeling heavy and dull.

“First Lieutenant Novak.” A voice comes from behind Castiel, and he turns. Walking up behind him is Major Singer. “You're up early.”

Castiel pulls his hands out of his pockets; he straightens up. “Yes, sir.”

“That's good,” Singer says. “I think you could stand to spend a little more time getting things organised.”

Castiel doesn't react.

“Which reminds me – here.” Singer unzips a pocket of his combat jacket and pulls out a handful of folded papers. He flicks through slowly, examining each one in great detail while Castiel waits motionless, until at last he pulls one out and passes it over to him. “The list of the replacements who'll be coming in to fill in the gaps in your company.”

Castiel skim-reads the list. With the exception of one Corporal Adina, the list is entirely compiled of Privates. There are a handful of E-2s, and three First Class, but otherwise, it's unpromising. “Thank you, sir,” Castiel says, even as he thinks that he is being delivered cannon-fodder. He has been losing sergeants, staff-sergeants, corporals, and specialists, and they are being exchanged for privates. “Do you know when they're expected to ship in?”

“They'll be here on the 23rd.”

Castiel nods. Distantly, he thinks he has to say something. He doesn't want to. He should keep his mouth shut. However, he is too quiet for too long, and Singer notices.

“Is there an issue here, lieutenant?”

Castiel swallows. “No, sir,” he says hesitantly. “I just wonder if you know whether I might be assigned any more technicians soon.”

“You've got what you've got, Novak. Be grateful for it.”

“I appreciate that, sir, and I am grateful, but I'm down two radiomen, one engineer, and I only have three combat medics for a company of a hundred men, not to mention--”

“Novak,” Singer interrupts, voice sharp, and Castiel falls into silence. For a moment Singer only stares him down. Then he says, “You've got what you've got,” again, more firmly, and Castiel knows that there is no room for negotiation on this.

“Yes, sir,” Castiel says.

“That'll be all for now, lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir.”

Singer gives him a curt nod, and then turns away in the direction of the mess hall. Castiel looks back at his list as the S-1 disappears down the road. Sixteen new men. These green men will be slotted in where more experienced, better trained, more dedicated men of higher rank and specialism used to be, and the soldiers already in the company will have to step up to the plate in order to fill the shoes of the NCOs they're missing. Some of them are getting promoted – Corporal Harvelle to Sergeant, Sergeant Mills to Staff Sergeant, Staff Sergeant Milligan to Sergeant First Class, Privates Bradbury and Miller up to Lance Corporal – but mostly, there will be men forced to take on the stress and responsibilities of a higher rank without the perks or the pay grade.

Castiel can already tell that morale is going to be a serious problem

when they move out, and he doesn't suppose that at the moment he is the best candidate for inspiring pep talks on the glory of being at war, but the facts are simple. They can't go back; they can't go home; they can only go forwards, and go where they're told, and eventually this will be over.

He turns over his list to see if there are any names hidden on the back that he hasn't seen, and then pulls his notebook out of his jacket to make notes, and then he hears, “Lieutenant Novak?”

Castiel looks back over his shoulder, and there is Dean, tall and solid, with his helmet held in two hands in front of him. He looks smaller without it. His expression is wary, his eyes careful.

“Good morning, Sergeant Winchester,” Castiel acknowledges, and he turns back the way he was facing to continue flicking through his notebook. “Is everything alright?”

“Uh, yeah. Fine.” Dean comes up and around Castiel's left side to stand awkwardly next to him. His fingers jitter nervously on his chin-strap. “Uhh. Sir, can I speak with you?”

“Of course. How can I help?” Castiel says, and he sees Dean blink, surprised. Castiel isn't an idiot; they've done this enough times now that he knows what Dean expects – to be ignored. The silent treatment. Castiel is too exhausted for that. He just wants this to be over.

“Actually – can we maybe speak somewhere else? More privately.”

Castiel looks past Dean's shoulder. Some ten or fifteen feet down the road, there are a handful of men from Charlie Company wandering out of their billets with their combat jackets unzipped, heading

towards the mess hall. As Castiel takes in the scene, a platoon from Able come jogging past in formation, breathing heavy, rifles clanking. Castiel turns back to Dean. “Is this not private enough?”

Dean opens his mouth, and says nothing. Castiel can see his throat work. He doesn't prompt him; he waits.

At last, Dean manages, “Talk to me.”

Castiel looks at him. “I am doing.”

“No, I mean--” Dean cuts himself off, and glances backwards over his shoulder to check whether anyone is within earshot. Castiel just looks at him. “Look, sir – I gotta be honest, I'm worried about you.”

“There's no need,” Castiel says.

“Don't do this, okay?” There is something rough in Dean's voice. “You're pissed off with me, sir, I know it. So come on, fucking – be pissed off with me.” He is fidgeting on the balls of his feet, unable to keep still. Anxious. “Come on, get mad. Tell me I'm a careless asshole. A pain in your ass. Tell me this is over.”

Castiel doesn't know why he does it. He's not entirely paying attention; his gaze is caught somewhere past Dean, where two civilians in dust-heavy work-clothes struggle to carry a wooden cabinet across the road. He is feeling too heavy, too sluggish, to argue. He says, “Tell you what's over?”

Dean stares at him. “What? Us. What are you--” It takes Dean a moment to realise. “Wait. Sir – don't.”

Slowly, Castiel turns to meet his eyes. “What us?”

For the longest time, Dean doesn't speak. He just looks at Castiel, understanding blooming slowly across his face and turning sour. He looks like he's been punched. “Jesus Christ,” he says. He drags a hand down over his mouth. “Sir, you can't just--”

“Forgive me,” Castiel says, and he feels so far away from himself that his mouth moves slow and distracted, “but what exactly are you accusing me of? Because I can assure you, sergeant, there is no--”

“Don't fucking *sergeant* me,” Dean snaps, and he should get in trouble for that, but Castiel is tired. Dean surges forwards into Castiel's space. “You can't do this, okay? You wanna be on your own, right now, I get that, but you are honest to God fucked up right now.”

“Winchester.” Castiel says it like a warning.

Dean steps forwards into Castiel's space, close enough to be almost threatneing. “I think you know you need me,” he says.

Castiel stares back at him, blank. “I don't.”

Dean flinches.

“Sergeant,” Castiel says then, and he holds Dean's eyes. “I think it would be best for you to leave now.”

Dean swallows, hard. His eyes move over Castiel's face, and he is weakening. “Cas,” he says, voice strained.

“I hope that I've made myself clear,” Castiel says. “For your sake, I will keep this conversation in professional confidentiality. You're a good combat medic, and a good influence within the company – we would hate to lose you.” It sounds like a threat, he realises, but maybe it's better that way. Then he registers, too late, what Dean has said. *Cas.* Distantly, he thinks Dean must have been trying to get a rise out of him. It hardly seems worth it. “I hope I can trust in your professionalism in return.”

Dean nods his head, looking almost numb. “Yeah,” he says, sounding the least sure he's ever sounded of anything. “Yeah, I can be professional.”

“I'm glad to hear it.” Castiel keeps his tone measured and calm. “Now – is there anything else I can help you with?”

Dean doesn't look at him. “No, sir.”

“Then that'll be all.”

Defeat doesn't look good on Winchester. It twists through his mouth, curves his shoulders down, leaves him looking small and misshapen. “Yes, sir.” He does a small nod, and then he turns away to leave.

Castiel doesn't watch as he walks away. He looks back to his list, surveying names and ages and rank, and then, in his peripheral vision, he sees Dean stop. He turns halfway, as though he hasn't decided whether or not come back. Castiel pretends he hasn't seen him, even as Dean looks at him in a moment that lasts and lasts. Then Dean speaks.

“You know, sir, eventually I'm not always gonna keep coming back, right?”

Castiel doesn't look up. He keeps his eyes on his list, looking over the names to try and learn them – Armstrong, Renouf, Pazhayattil, Sadler – and he says, “Good.”

Then Dean is gone, without an answer, and it is only when Castiel is absolutely certain that there is no sign of him that he folds away his list into his notebook and tucks them back into his combat jacket. He lifts his head to look down the street – at the men jacking up a scout car to replace a burst tyre, at two supply officers arguing over a crate of 50mm shells, at a stray black dog sniffing at something on the floor. It's only just now approaching reveille, and even in the wake of siege, for now the world is quiet and still.

He walks. He doesn't know what else to do. There is the *boulangerie* along the next road, still trying to turn out bread in spite of everything, for the soldiers and for the people who still live here; there is a young woman in a worn grey dress holding hands with a soldier from Easy Company, speaking in low voices; there is a heap of rubble two storeys high, all shattered wood and concrete; there is a shelled-out church.

Castiel goes in without thinking about it. Force of habit.

The ceiling has fallen in, and while the left wall still stands in its entirety, the rest of it is crumbling. One transept has no trace of it left except for the gap in the structure where hazy, grey sunlight pours through. There is a heap of grey stone along one side of the aisle, dusty pews lying in pieces, shattered under impact. There are small shards of glass in bright colours that crunch underfoot. Castiel walks in slowly, boots dragging.

There is a wood-working along one side of the nave that depicts the Virgin Mary, and it's thoughtless reflex, the way Castiel sees it and thinks, *our Lady of Perpetual Succour, behold at thy feet a sinner, who trusts in thee; be therefore my refuge and my hope*-- and then he stops himself. If she hasn't helped this far, she won't help now.

He turns away, and he looks across the church at the rubble and the slowly rising brick dust, and he considers prayer, for the first time, for what it is: sitting alone in a dark room, talking to yourself. He thinks who he would pray to - Sebastian, patron saint of soldiers; Jude, patron saint of lost causes; Dymphna, patron saint of people losing their fucking minds – and he rubs a hand over his face. It's useless.

Castiel sits at the far end of a pew, without genuflection. He doesn't pray. He just sits there, with his hands loose in his lap, and he watches the dust settle.

23rd September, 1944

Word from Battalion is that Baker Company will be moving out imminently, along with the rest of the 116th, and indeed most of the division – and Castiel does not feel ready.

He's been itching to get back into the field for almost a week now, hating this useless period of waiting and close-order drills and calisthenics, because anything, even chaos and gunfire, is better than all this free time to fill. However, now that he's heard from Major Campbell that they don't have long before they'll be moving north-east for their next operation, all his old panic has come flooding back.

Castiel is not a good commanding officer. This is something of which he is convinced. He can think tactically, he can plan assaults and organise his men to be at optimum efficiency, he can lead them into war, but he doesn't know what to do when he gets there.

He sees two options – either to treat his men like pawns, and move them through battle after battle with no concern for their lives, or to care for them as real people who he knows well, who he must protect even at the risk of disobeying orders. He can't do both. He can't, apparently, do either. He is starting to crack under pressure, as Hester did, back in England, and he feels there is nothing he can do about it, except for relying on his platoon-leaders for support – and there-in is the real problem. Castiel isn't sure he can rely on some of his platoon-leaders for anything, let alone for keeping his command under control.

Castiel doesn't know what to do about it, but he knows that he can't let it keep spinning endlessly inside his head, or he'll lose his mind, and so he sets off in search of Gabriel.

He rehearses what he's going to say as he heads towards the Fox Company CP, but there is no sign of him there. One of the Fox NCOs suggests that he might be near his billets, past the church on the main boulevard, but when Castiel gets there, he only finds Lieutenant Cain, smoking heavily and determinedly ignoring him.

It takes him twenty minutes searching, but at last, he rounds the corner of the 1st Battalion CP on the far side of Rue d'Aiguillon, and catches sight of Gabriel, with his hands in his pockets, speaking to two men that Castiel doesn't recognise. He can tell from their uniform that they are NCOs, and that they are artillerymen. They are also black.

He supposes they must be from one of field artillery battalions who were fighting on the far side of Brest. Castiel had heard rumours that a few of the racially segregated units had been involved in the invasion – if obscene jokes and derogatory jeering can be considered rumours – but this is the first time he's seen them. Castiel hesitates, and then heads over.

“Captain Laufeyson,” he says, by way of greeting, and comes to stand

beside him. He doesn't greet the corporals.

Gabriel looks over. “Lieutenant – hi.” He looks back towards the men he was speaking to – one tall and narrow, the other smaller and more solidly built. “This is Corporal Hendriksen, Lance Corporal Walker – with the 333rd. We were just talking about the invasion. You know that these guys were the ones who took out those big guns along the Penfeld and saved our asses?”

Castiel shakes his head.

“Yeah, me either.”

Castiel doesn't know what to say. He isn't entirely sure he believes it, either. He goes with, “Thanks for that.”

The corporal gives a small laugh. He sounds nervous. “The lieutenant is making it sound bigger than it was, sir. We were just doing our jobs, sir.”

Gabriel turns to Castiel. “They were down on the Daoulas Peninsula, to the south-east of us – the other side of the Élorn, you remember?”

“I remember,” Castiel says.

“Yeah, well, they had an OP set up there where they could see everything. Everything. They took out those guns, they sourced about a dozen more to pass on down the line for intelligence – Christ, they even took out a destroyer hidden in the U-boat pens when they couldn't even see what was what.”

Castiel looks over at Gabriel with a frown. “Really?” It's not that he doesn't think these men and the rest of them aren't capable of doing something so significant; it just doesn't seem likely, is all.

“Yeah, really,” Gabriel says, with bizarre enthusiasm. Castiel isn't entirely sure why he's even talking to them. Gabriel turns to the taller of the two. “What were you saying your friend thought the ship was?”

“A pile of rocks or something, sir,” the corporal says. “We were all making fun of him, sir, saying he was just wasting shells on nothing, but he was plugging at it and eventually we--”

“Laufeyson, may I speak with you?” Castiel says, and he turns to Gabriel. He doesn't look at the corporals, who have fallen silent. “Privately?”

“Yeah, of course.” Gabriel turns back to excuse himself from the corporals – God only knows why – and even stays to return their salute when they come to attention, before he follows Castiel away down the street. As they walk away, Gabriel is oddly quiet.

Castiel glances back at him. “What?”

Gabriel jerks a half-shrug. “Nothing,” he says. “Only – they're people, you know.”

Castiel gives him a sharp look. “I know that.”

“And they did a lot for us during the invasion,” Gabriel goes on.

“I'm sure they did.”

“Operation Dragoon could well have been a total failure without them. You realise that, right?”

“This isn't what I wanted to talk to you about,” Castiel says irritably. “I have to be on parade in half an hour, I don't have time for a lecture.”

“Yeah, okay. Fine. What is it you're after?”

Castiel hesitates. “I presume you've heard about our upcoming movements.”

“Oh yeah, I've heard,” Gabriel says sourly. “Le Mans, then Paris, then Reims – and we don't get to stop off at any of them. Can you fucking believe it?”

“You should have applied for that furlough,” Castiel says.

“I did! Only it's all cancelled now, so what's the use of even offering it to us?”

“Keep us placid,” Castiel suggests.

“Yeah, yeah.” As Gabriel grumbles quietly, there is a natural lull in the conversation, and Castiel can feel it – the expectation that he'll get to

the point now. He doesn't know how to go about explaining himself.

They walk, and in Castiel's peripheral vision, he can see Gabriel looking over at him.

“So, anyway – what was it you wanted to talk to me about?”

Castiel is quiet. They walk along in silence, side-by-side, while Castiel struggles with the weight on his chest. He can't get the words out: *I'm not confident in my platoon-leaders.*

It's something that he keeps thinking about – the fact that Alistair keeps making serious, devastating mistakes that come back to land on Castiel's head; the way that Hester hates Castiel for getting CO in his place and takes every possible opportunity to undermine him; the fact that Chuck Shurley is a fucking disaster, plain and simple, and Castiel doesn't know how he can be expected to look after an entire platoon when he can barely look after himself. He has Virgil, still, who is good, but he's heading one-platoon, which is already the strongest in terms of NCOs and experienced men, and Castiel hardly wants to uproot the entire company re-ordering everyone to even out the score for the sake of one officer. Moreover, he's quiet, and keeps to himself, which is perfectly acceptable in itself, but not much help with the problem of Castiel's dealing with the other officers, not like--

“Novak?”

Castiel swallows. “I--”

His throat is closing up. He feels as though his tongue has swollen six sizes. He tells himself it's no reflection on himself if all his platoon-leaders are fucked – that's not his fault, he didn't ask for this – but he knows how it will sound. He's just one man, somehow struggling with

almost all of his officers. He knows what they'll say: *maybe they're not the problem.* Castiel isn't an idiot – he knows he's not popular. If he turns on his own men, the likelihood of anyone taking his side is slim at best. He'll have nothing. Any new officers he might be assigned won't necessarily like him any better. He wouldn't even know them; they might not even respect him. They might even be draftees.

As he walks in silence, anxiety climbing in his throat, it strikes him that Gabriel is, technically, his superior. They are friends, but, Gabriel being a captain, any unofficial complaint mentioned even in passing could be taken as a serious concern in need of action. The mere act of griping, even this once, could result in Castiel's entire company being turned over.

“Hey. Novak. You still in there?”

Gabriel has stopped walking. He is stood a few feet from Castiel, and the look on his face falls somewhere between being amused and concerned.

“Fine,” Castiel manages, and realises too late that it's not the answer to the question Gabriel asked. “Yes. I'm just...” His eyes move past Gabriel's shoulder and he is distracted. There is a man stumbling down the steps of a building on the other side of the road. He has one hand pressed to his forehead, where blood is oozing slow and thick to catch in one eyebrow.

Gabriel leans forwards and snaps his fingers twice in front of Castiel's face. “Hey. Hey, wake up.” He settles back, eyebrows raised, as Castiel drags his eyes back over to focus on him. “Seriously, are you alright?”

“Yes. I just – wanted to ask you about furlough, that's all,” Castiel says, and it sounds like bullshit even to him, but he is past the point of caring. “Whether they are all cancelled, which – yes. Thank you. I

have to – I have parade soon. I'll see you."

Castiel nods at him in acknowledgement before he heads off; Gabriel only looks at him like he's grown another head. Then, as Castiel walks, he thinks that perhaps he wasn't terribly convincing – perhaps he should have smiled. It's too late now.

He tells himself that he made the right choice. It was the better thing, to not speak to Gabriel about his concerns. The situation is manageable.

There are ten minutes or so until parade, but there are soldiers hanging around already, so as not to be late. There are a couple of Baker's men lounging about on the steps up to a small, half-destroyed greengrocers'; First Sergeant Masters stands by side of the road with his arms folded across his chest as he listens to a handful of the young, new draftees; there are men laughing with a small group of women in the neat coloured bandanas of French resistance nurses. Castiel can see Harvelle, Bradbury, and Kevin Tran, and then, as Castiel continues walking past, he sees Corporal Mills with them, and he sees Dean.

Dean leans over, elbow propped on the windowsill at his back, and Castiel can't hear the words coming out of his mouth, but his grin is wide and bright. As he talks, his body is a long curve towards the girls.

Castiel slows.

Beside the girls, Dean looks taller than ever, broad and solid at the chest and shoulders. He has his helmet upside down in the crook of his arm, and he is clean, freckled and sun-brown when he's not smeared with dirt or camouflage. His hair is a little untidy, and he looks all at once comforting and so handsome it hurts, and while Castiel is busy staring at him, Dean happens to glance up. Their eyes

meet.

Something clouds over Dean's face, his smile dimming at the edges, and his eyes turn hard. Castiel's jaw tightens, because he recognises that look – Dean's bone-deep obstinacy, his determination bordering on the dangerous – and he braces himself. He knew that this would happen at some point, Dean confronting him in public with all his hurt and fury, because Dean doesn't have a professional bone in his body, but he's ready for it now.

Let Winchester do his worst, Castiel thinks, and then Dean looks away.

He turns to the nurse beside him, a fair-haired girl with a smile that is sweet and sunny, and he grins wider than ever. Mills makes some obscene joke, gesturing, and Dean bursts out with a laugh, and Castiel stands on the other side of the road with hands uselessly clenched tight into fists.

Slowly, Castiel loosens his hands. He feels himself come down from straight-spined superiority, unclicking vertebrae by vertebrae to slump at the shoulders.

Dean is keeping his distance, then. Good.

Castiel exhales. He watches Dean's mouth move, a little jerky around unfamiliar sounds, and then the girls are laughing at him, and Castiel realises that Dean must be trying to speak French. One of them has long, dark hair, and she laughs with her head thrown back, and she touches Dean's arm.

Castiel looks at his watch. Four minutes to parade formation. The nurse is speaking loudly – *non, je te taquine juste, t'es trop beau pour être drôle* – and the girls are laughing again, while Dean grins and goes,

“What? What's she saying about me now? You making fun of me?”

This is what Castiel wanted. Dean is a distraction and a liability and Castiel is tired of making the wrong choices. This is good.

Men are beginning to form up loosely on the square, lazily stood at ease as Corporal Mills bosses them into the right places, his arm tucked close to his body where he's still recovering from his dislocated shoulder. Castiel watches them shuffle and fidget and bicker, standing apart as he waits. His eyes are heavy; he stifles a yawn.

“I'm telling you, ditch all that shit on how you're gonna fuck her sideways when you get home, okay?” Private Spangler is saying as he walks over with a couple of the men from one-platoon. “Get some dumb flowery shit in there. You know, romantic-like. I told Susie I was looking at the stars and thinking of her--”

Zeddmore pretends to vomit, while Private Turner starts up in complaint. “That sounds stupid, though – I don't want to do any fuckin' star-gazing.”

“Hey – quit it. You asked me for advice, and I am telling you, she ate that shit up. No lie. That's the way to do it.”

“Sounds like bullshit to me,” Zeddmore says.

“Yeah, and that's why you got a Dear John last week, and I got Susie Samways writing that she wants my goddamn babies. Okay? Okay. Now, then--”

At eight-fifty-five, Sergeant Milligan has them all in order, stood at

ease in three neat rows, and Castiel waits for them Milligan to fall into position before he heads over. He goes through the motions – parade, parade-*'tion,* at ease – and settles before them.

“First things first,” Castiel says, loud and clear, in a voice that he always thinks does not sound like his own. “Any man who applied for furlough to England, I regret to inform you that you have been unsuccessful.”

There is muffled groaning from somewhere amongst the company; in the back row, Private Maier swears under his breath, but is silenced by a frown from Sergeant Milligan.

“We're moving out in the next few days,” he goes on. “There's no word yet on where we're being sent, but a safe bet is north. Get your kit squared away and be ready to move within twelve hours' notice. Tonight's calisthenics have been cancelled in light of this – you'll be revisiting old navigational lessons instead. That'll be led by Sergeants Milligan, Masters, Garrigan, and Etheridge at seventeen-hundred-hours to end at nineteen-hundred years, in time for mess. During that time I want platoon-leaders on me for a briefing. There will an inspection of your quarters at twenty-two-hundred hours to ensure company readiness, and anyone whose quarters and kit are not found to be acceptable will receive appropriate reprimand.”

Castiel hasn't decided on the reprimand yet – he's thinking maybe a three-mile run instead of breakfast – but he supposes that the likelihood he'll actually need to make good on his threat is small. His NCOs know better than to let standards slip; they'll ensure that the company is ready.

“Are there any questions? Platoon-leaders – anything further to add?”

“No, sir,” comes back to him three times – three, because Chuck

Shurley is not paying attention – and so Castiel runs through the plan for the day again before he calls them to attention and lets them fall out.

As they turn and walk off to get to their duties, Castiel lets his eyes fall on Dean – who doesn't look his way even once. He starts up some conversation with Ash Lowell, his grin spreading wide and easy, and he starts off laughing, and he doesn't so much as glance Castiel's way. Good. This is the way it was fucking supposed to be.

Castiel walks away. He keeps his pace steady, measured, because he is not running away from Dean fucking Winchester. He has nothing to run away from.

Dean is the one who repeatedly fucks everything up, who comes and flips Castiel's world upside down and makes things complicated. He walks quickly down the road, past a half-decimated building where some infantrymen from the 175th are sitting around talking and laughing. Dean is the one who causes problems, and Castiel is perfectly within his rights as Dean's superior officer to decide that he wants no more to do with him.

He skirts a soldier carrying a broken table, another man carrying a heavy wooden crate, and he is just on the way towards being calm when the second man trips. The crate falls from his arms, and it hits the cobbles with a deafening crash just behind him.

All the air in Castiel's lungs leaves him in one shaky burst, and he doesn't know what he's doing, but suddenly his head is spinning – third-storey building, quarter-left of axis, observe for muzzle-flash – and his mouth is dry – enfilade along the main road, no cover, nowhere to go except flat on his belly behind the rubble – and his hands are shaking. Gap between two houses, wide enough for artillery, the square behind him and no-one at his six o'clock to cover him. He can't turn it off. Hotel across the road, wide bay windows, possible gunner position observed.

He forces himself to walk slowly, even with everything in his body screaming to go faster, to run until he's safe, but he is safe. He's secure here; they've taken Brest; everything is fine.

He breathes hard through his nose and tries to remember how to be calm even as his eyes flash wildly from side to side, all at once seeing everything – stone church, clock tower almost intact; white building, second-storey, shutters open for sniper position – and seeing nothing, walking blind.

Breathe. Breathe. Castiel veers right, down an alley between two half-torn buildings, and without thinking he finds a space amongst the rubble where he is hidden from view, where he has a wall at his back to act as his cover, as well as a good sight-line of the main road. He drops to one knee there, and as he settles with his shoulders against the stonework, he realises that he has his rifle in his hands. Loaded. He doesn't remember doing that.

He steadies himself with a hand on the ground, just beside his boot. The dirt under his fingers, gritty with small chunks of rubble, digs into the meat of his palm. He is still in the sight-line of the third-storey building, the high broken window to his eleven o'clock, but it doesn't matter. He has good enough cover – and there is nothing there, which is of more immediate importance. There is no gunfire. This place is secure. He breathes.

Castiel unloads his weapon. He puts his ammunition clip back into his webbing, and clicks the pouch closed. He stands up. He tries to remember that he is safe.

24th September, 1944

The time has come, and Brest is torn up with movement and chaos. The 115th have already moved out east, in trains and trucks and

slowly rolling tanks, and the 116th are next. They are due to board their own transport at oh-five-hundred hours, so they have just under an hour to go, and Castiel is worried that they aren't going to be ready.

The weather is turning, and with the exception of a few replacements, the entire company are still wearing the combats they landed on Omaha with. Back near Saint Lo, Castiel heard men discussing the fact that they had left their shirts behind, wearing only an undershirt, or that they had only brought one pair of socks, and while that suited them just fine for eighty-five degrees in July, the temperature is dropping now, and it will be colder in Germany.

Castiel heads for the old German headquarters built into the hillside overlooking the sea, alongside the U-boat pens, and he heads down the stairs into the underground bunker in search of a supply officer who might be able to help him.

Every room he comes to is full of people running backwards and forwards, organising boxes and bags of equipment – everyone in too much of a hurry to speak to him. There is one private who barks, “Excuse me!” at Castiel as he shoves past, and he's going too fast for Castiel to even consider dressing him down for speaking to an officer like that; he's already gone.

In one room, there is a corporal rummaging through a deep box filled to the brim with what looks like spare sugar packs from K-rations, who doesn't look too busy. Castiel pauses in the doorway.

“Excuse me,” Castiel calls over, and the corporal lifts his head, and then, noting the pin on Castiel's collar, stands up straight. “Do you know where I might find the 2nd Battalion supply officer for the 116th?”

“Sorry, sir, don't know. I saw Major Laskey about somewhere on the floor below, though – he might be able to direct you.”

Castiel nods. “Thank you. That'll be all.”

The corporal snaps off a quick salute, which Castiel duly returns, and then he turns to head down the stairs, deeper into the old German headquarters. It gets colder the further down he goes into stone and concrete, the air almost damp with the chill, and while there are helpful signs, they're written in German, and only some of them have notes in English underneath. Nonetheless, Castiel successfully finds his way to the supply floor.

The first room that Castiel looks into is empty; the second is filled by a handful of NCOs arguing heatedly about whether there are enough K-rations to go around the entirety of the 175th; the third is again, empty. There is one last door on the end, and Castiel thinks that if this is empty as well, he'll just have to go back up to the room where he found that corporal and ask him for assistance, humiliating as that may be.

Castiel pushes the door open, and he only gets two steps into the supply room when he realises he's made a mistake, because this room is occupied.

As soon as he hears the grunting, the sweaty sound of bodies moving, he recoils back a step, and his eyes flick up instinctively before he can tell himself that he doesn't want to see whatever is happening in here – and by then it's too late to look away, because he recognises Dean.

It hits him like a punch, all the air rushing out of him, and he can't move. He feels his stomach curl gradually into a coldly twisted thing, his throat tight as though he's going to throw up.

He tells himself that he's only still looking because he has to be sure, but he already knows. The man's back is turned to Castiel, the nurse pushed onto her back over a supply cupboard, but it's undeniably Dean. There is the curve of his legs, the top of his ass where his combat pants have slipped down; there are his broad shoulders tilted over her; there are the freckles over his lower back where the nurse has dragged his shirt up. There is the Red Cross-issued helmet abandoned on the floor.

Castiel feels sick. Here is some woman Dean barely knows, and she gets to have this. Dean, almost undressed with his shirt rumpled, hips snapping forwards into her, and he's loud like he never was with Castiel. He groans, bursts out with, *yeah, God, fuck*, like he doesn't care who hears them, and Castiel hates the unconscious flicker of heat in his belly at that.

He always wanted to hear what Dean would sound like if he didn't have to restrain himself; he didn't want it like this.

The nurse gasps against Dean's shoulder, and she's speaking in French as her hands slide up to cup the back of his head, to dig her nails into his shoulder. She has dark hair.

Castiel takes a step backwards, and a floorboard creaks under his foot. Underneath Dean, the nurse looks up, and she meets Castiel's eyes.

He turns and walks out as fast as he can, leaving the door wide open. He doesn't know where he's going, but he knows he has to get out of here fast. He walks blindly, his mind stuck on the rough texture of Dean's voice – *fuck, yeah, like that, God* – and he crashes right into someone.

“Sorry,” Castiel says, blinking to orient himself, and he finds himself looking at Private Yen.

“No, it's my fault, sir,” Yen says, even though it isn't, and then he frowns. “Sir, is everything--”

“Fine, thank you.” Castiel tries for something near a smile, but it's strained, and then, before he can stop himself, he goes on: “Yen, could you do me a favour and see if you can find Sergeant Winchester? He's meant to be here somewhere – perhaps on the supply level. Please tell him he's needed for a supply run at battalion medical CP immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” Yen nods, and Castiel doesn't wait a moment longer to check that it's done. He walks away.

Castiel heads up the last flight of the stairs up from the submarine bunker, and out into the hazy daylight, where preparation to move out is beginning to pick up to towards the point of frenzy. He stands there for several seconds in the doorway, breathing slowly, and he doesn't think about Dean fucking someone else. He doesn't think about the low, guttural sound Dean makes when shame and secrecy doesn't seal his mouth shut; he doesn't think about that nurse's hands in Dean's hair – he doesn't, he doesn't – he squeezes his eyes shut. He pinches the bridge of his nose tight., breathes deep, and then sets off through the crowd.

Today begins the nine-hundred-mile march towards the Netherlands, and there is a lot to be prepared. The entire 29th Infantry Division is in the process of loading train after train full of men, weapons, rations, equipment, and more men, ready to ship out east.

They move crates and drive scout cars up ramps into empty storage carriages, ready to piled full of ammunition and supplies. They gather

as many 50mm shells as they can get their hands on and send them up to the anti-aircraft guns mounted at the ends of the train for mobile defence. They pack up their haversacks tight and secure, writing as clearly as possible on wide strips of green tape so that they can find their equipment when they get to Liège, and administrative men run back and forth with their hands full of mail, trying to get letters to the right soldiers before they move out. On the far side of the street, First Lieutenant Naomi is dressing down one of his replacements for having left their rifle behind while on-task.

“Did you find it, sir?”

Castiel jumps. He turns around, heart pounding, to see Sergeant Milligan beside him, with a spare rations crate under one arm. “What?”

“The warm weather gear, sir,” Milligan clarifies. “Did you find it?”

Castiel blinks at him, bewildered, and then he remembers – the supply room, the thighs tight around Dean's hips, the scratched roughness of his voice as he gasped out and-- “No,” Castiel says. “I didn't.”

Milligan mouth twists regretfully. “Damn. Maybe we could ask the S-4 if he's got any going spare?”

Castiel nods. “I'll bear it in mind if I see him. Excuse me, sergeant.” He steps neatly past Milligan, and continues on his way.

By eleven-hundred-hours, with less than half an hour until the 116th is scheduled to move out, the preparations have reached fever pitch.

The men of the 2nd Battalion are a disorganised hoard, enlisted men mixed with officers, administrative staff frantically trying to create some semblance of order while NCOs just try to ensure that they don't motor-march off to a different country and leave someone behind. There are haversacks being flung haphazardly into train carriages, by company and by platoon; there are heavy wooden crates of live munitions and rations being hauled back and forth by soldiers who look too small to even be able to lift them. And, of course, there are the women.

There is a girl with long blonde hair who twists her arms tearfully around Corporal Sorento's neck; there is a nurse in her standard-issue blue bandana, her hand curled tight into Lieutenant Virgil's sleeve, and from here Castiel can hear her: “You will come back? After Germany, you will come back here--”

There is Calahee, his arms caught by Private Miller and Corporal Sorento to drag him away to the nearest deuce-and-a-half – near frantic as he says, “Baby, I don't know what you're saying, you gotta – *tu dois*, uh, slow down, alright?”

“*Tu m'écriras?”* she is saying, red-eyed, and she smooths her hands over the front of his jacket. “*Tu vas tellement me manquer – s'il te plaît, t'as mon adresse, écris-moi*--”

Castiel comes past just as she throws herself forwards to kiss him. “Wrap it up, Calahee,” he says sharply, and he jerks his head aside to miss a flailing arm. “We're formed up in the square, all baggage on transport and ready to board, in five.”

“Come on, Frank, let's go, let's go,” Miller urges, a hand tight on his elbow, and the woman bursts into tears. Castiel ducks through the middle of a argument between two radiomen, and then he catches sight of Dean, wandering around with his helmet in hand. He has several pages of a letter in the other hand, lined with neat blue script. His shirt-tails are untucked.

Castiel takes a deep breath and looks away. He doesn't have time to think about that now.

He goes back and forth ensuring that everything his company needs is accounted for on the train – with the exception of Private Bass, who is arguing with Alistair about needing to get his haversack off the train to change his socks – and he has First Sergeant Masters to run by him a third, fourth, and fifth time that everything is running smoothly, and then he gets Baker formed up for a head-count, platoon by platoon. Everyone is present and ready, weapons unloaded and clean, platoon-leaders all reporting back as being confident in their preparations, and then it is time to go.

One-platoon first. Sergeant Milligan leads the way on, Virgil lingering behind to count heads as they climb on board one by one, struggling to get through the door with their webbing and weapons. Bradbury slips on the muddy step up, and Harvelle helps out by slapping his ass, and only a few sharp words from Castiel keeps the situation from becoming entirely ridiculous.

He is the last one from Baker to get on, and by that point the clouds overhead are tangling together, thick and hazy with the promise of rain as autumn closes in.

Castiel pushes onto the carriage, rifle held tight against his chest to keep from hitting anyone with it, and tries to get through the men to a seat for himself. He can't help catching snippets of conversation as he goes through.

“--fuck's sake, no way, okay? Don't listen to a word of it. Bad news from home, my ass – he's just sore 'cause George got two grand off him last night in Blackjack.”

“Nah, that can't be it, I saw him and he was really cut up about it – said that he got a letter from his mother and--”

“Hey. Fuck his mother. Alright? It's--”

Castiel pushes further along, stepping carefully over sprawled out feet with a restrained *excuse me... excuse me...* as he goes.

“--but wow, you should've seen the rack on Kevin's little blonde one,” Corporal Lowell is saying loudly as Castiel squeezes through the end of the carriage, his face cut up with a delighted smile. “I swear to you, I am not a religious man, but when I saw her--”

“Hey, get lost!” Tran objects. “I actually like her, okay? So back off.”

“Come on, you don't want to share with your old friend, Ash? Really, after all I've--”

“No, I do not want to share with you--”

“Yeah, fuck knows where you've been, you fuckin' dirty animal.”

“Christ, I know where he's been and I still don't wanna share.” There is Dean's voice, and they laugh.

Castiel stops.

“Hey, Ash, didn't you have that pretty dark-haired girl anyway?”

Bradbury asks. “What happened with her?”

“Nah, man, she wasn't interested in me. Turns out she only had eyes for the good doctor,” Lowell says, and there is a uproar of agreement – someone laughing, someone jeering – and Castiel feels sick to his stomach. He doesn't want to hear this. He tries to keep pushing past.

“Wait, so what was this broad's name again?”

“Elise Braeden,” Dean says, and there is something triumphant in his voice.

“You gonna write to her?”

“Nah. We had a good time, but, uh. Nothing life-changing.”

“Damnit.”

There is a pause, and then Lowell says, “So does that mean she's free, then?”

The men burst out into new laughter, and Castiel can't take it a second longer. He is attracting stares from enlisted men nearby as he hovers, neither here or there between the carriages, and so he pushes through – stopping, as he goes, to say. “Sergeant Winchester, you're needed up by the guns. Immediately.” He wants to keep his voice neutral, calm, but he can hear that it comes out cold.

Dean looks over at him. “What?”

Castiel offers no further clarification. He continues down the carriage. It's hard work getting through, men sprawled across every available seat, some spilling out into the aisle with their legs outstretched, some still clutching haversacks where there wasn't enough room in the baggage carriage. Castiel gets the ironsight of an M1 to the thigh as he squeezes through three-platoon, and bites back the temptation to snap at someone. He grits his teeth against the quick-swelling pain of it – that's going to bruise – and continues pushing through.

He finds space down the far end of carriage fifteen, at the tail-end of two-platoon, and he drops down into a seat opposite First Sergeant Masters. He undoes his chin-strap, loosens the buckle of his webbing to adjust the pouches so that he can sit back, and props his rifle between his knees.

First Sergeant Masters has his eyes closed. He cracks one open as Castiel settles. “Morning, sir,” he says, and closes his eyes again. It's not a bad idea, trying to get some sleep – they'll be on this train for hours, and dawn is still only now struggling grey and cold over the horizon. They might as well get comfortable.

“First Sergeant,” Castiel says by way of greeting, and looks over to find Lieutenant Shurley in the seat beside him, worrying one hand against a beard that is surely longer than regulations allow. “Chuck. How are the men?”

Without opening his eyes, Master says, “Mostly down with shits, lieutenant.”

“What?” Castiel stares at him, bewildered. “Why?”

“A-rations, that's why,” Lieutenant Shurley starts, in a voice with the

distinct tone of *don't get me started*, and Castiel immediately regrets having asked. “Four fucking months, these kids don't know an apple from their elbow, and now they're getting carrots. They can't cope – hell, none of us can.” He lifts a finger, jabbing, accusatory, towards Castiel. “And just you wait until we get back in the field, when we get the wave of debilitating constipation that's gonna sweep through the company like the goddamn plague. There aren't gonna be enough laxatives in the northern hemisphere to get us regular again. Carrots. Christ. What were they thinking?”

Castiel has no idea what to say to that. He just looks at him, and then at Masters, who wears a look that straddles the line between amused and annoyed. “Whatever you say, sir,” Masters says. He half-opens one eye again and looks towards Castiel with a smirk. “So how are you faring on that front, lieutenant?”

“I'm fine, First Sergeant,” Castiel says. “Thank you for asking. So, aside from these dietary concerns, how are they doing?”

Masters seems to resign himself to the fact that he isn't going to get any sleep until Castiel is satisfied with his answers, and he sits up, eyes open. “Alright, for the most part. Some issues, but they should resolve themselves soon enough.”

Castiel's frown deepens. “What issues?”

“Men not wanting to go back into the field.”

Castiel isn't surprised. This is nothing new. “Replacements?”

“No, the replacements are fine. The replacements are the ones raring to be the first to use Adolf Hitler's head as a football,” Masters says, with more than a touch of disdain to his voice, and there is a barely

restrained eye roll. “It's old draftees that are the problem. They know what they're in for.”

Castiel looks in his jacket pockets for his cigarette tin instead of answering. Morale: he knew it was going to be an issue. He pulls a cigarette out – his last, with the exception of the half-stub tucked into one corner for his ride home – and lights up. “They'll be fine,” he says around it. “Just keep it from spreading.” He sucks in smoke, and looks out of the window past Shurley as the train creaks slowly out of the station, the rubble and seaside crawling by.

26th September, 1944

“Remind me again why we're doing this,” Donald Hanscum says.

Some ten feet back in the patrol, Castiel tries to restrain his irritation. The men are antsy, he knows that. They want to be back on reserve, and don't much like the idea of patrolling through unfamiliar territory in the dark in search of enemy positions that may or may not be there. It's not ideal, but it's necessary – someone has to do it.

Castiel doesn't mind too much. They've been on the motor march for two days now, with another two still to go, and he's glad to be out of the cramped quarters, even if it's only to wander around in the dead of the night looking for Krauts. It's not as though he's missing much, anyway. His days on the train are spent trying to word his reply letter to his cousin, Hannah; his nights are cold and sleepless. He might as well be here.

“There were a lot of small pockets of resistance around this area when the British first came through,” Corporal Sorento says. “They took care of every position they found but it's likely there's more out here that might be cut off. They might not know we've taken this whole country all the way up past Reims, and we don't want them causing any trouble.”

In the background, somewhere past Private Bass, Castiel hears, *where the hell is Reims?*

Hanscum grumbles. “Can't we just send in some tanks to scare the shit out of them until they all surrender?”

“Good question,” Sorento says. “Except for the fact that--”

“I'll be sure to pass your concerns up to the division,” Castiel says, raising his voice only slightly. “Now shut up and watch your sectors.”

Three-platoon falls into silence, and they walk on, boots crunching rhythmically on the gravel road. They follow it as it twists back east towards Chartres, and then they veer off-road down a shallow slope towards half-charred farmland, maize stunted and growing crooked.

It's coming up oh-one-hundred hours and the night is black, heavy cloud cover concealing the sky and leaving them lightless. The men in front of Castiel are no more than dim shapes, narrow and spiky with their rifle, their outwards-pointing elbows, their webbing pouches. Castiel can identify Bass by his height, Hanscum by the way he shuffles his M1 in his arms whenever his arms get tired. Ahead in the formation, there is one figure with no rifle, the shape of his arms suggesting hands in pockets; he walks with a slow, rolling gait. Castiel looks away.

Up ahead, there is a small hamlet of stone houses, some crumbling and otherwise scarred by mortar-fire, but mostly in-tact. It is still and quiet, all shuttered up, but there is lamplight washing warm and yellow across the buildings closest to the centre; that worries Castiel.

“Radio, on me,” he calls, voice soft.

Bass drops back in formation, already unhooking the mouth-piece from his radio.

“Call this in to the other platoons – possible enemy position observed, with our coordinates – at last check-point six-niner-three, three-seven-two.” Castiel tells him. “Find out where two-platoon is, in relation to the objective. And stay to the back.” He pulls his rifle up into his shoulder and moves with the platoon as Hester spreads the men out into arrow-head formation, splitting squads to flank the hamlet.

They move quickly, ducked low and trying to keep silence. Castiel follows first squad around the back of the nearest building, and pauses, pressed against the wall, as Somner and Hanscum push their way in through the front door to clear the house. On the far side of the hamlet, he can see pairs working through the various houses. There is a low stone wall along the edge, and Hester's platoon run along its long, unsteady line as they move through.

“Clear!” Two privates come bursting out of the third building along, with Corporal Sorento in tow, and one of them – a replacement, Private Concino – comes up to Castiel to report on some intelligence found in the bedroom, and then there is a sharp crack, and a whistling, and Hanscum is flung back onto the ground by one shoulder.

Castiel flinches back instinctively against the building behind him, and then he reacts properly. “Take cover,” he yells, and he grabs a handful of Concino's jacket to shove him violently forwards, following after, as he runs for the low stone wall and drops to a knee out of sight. There is the cry for a medic as Hanscum scrambles on his back in the dirt, one bloody hand pressed to his shoulder, trying to get up. “Hanscum, stay down!”

Sergeant Etheridge's voice comes through from further down the line. “Contact right!”

Castiel shifts his rifle in his hands, and adjusts his position so that he can peer over the top of the wall. He heard the whistle of the round going past, which means it was passed him only a couple yards away, which would indicate an axis of fire for the shooter – but as to where in that axis the enemy actual is, Castiel has no idea. He is just considering his options when Dean comes bumping past, shoving Castiel back against the wall in his hurry, and then he breaks out to get to Hanscum.

Dean moves fast, bent low, and he is ungentle in his haste – he slings Hanscum's good arm around his neck, grabs webbing and thigh, and hauls him up over his shoulder before coming back.

Castiel twists on his heel towards where Etheridge's voice came from. “Sergeant,” he calls out. “Any further word on the contact?”

“Nothing, sir – I didn't catch a flash. Can you see anything?”

Castiel swears under his breath. He edges a couple inches forwards along the wall and then twists up again to look over the edge. He doesn't want to stay up too long – even if he moved along to avoid popping up in the same place twice, he feels somewhat like a duck in a shooting gallery. He ducks back down. “No.”

There is silence from the shooter now – presumably he knows that they can't yet find him, and wants to keep the advantage a while longer. Castiel calls for Private Bass.

“Radio for Hester,” he instructs, and risks raising his head above the wall again while Bass rings through, *Baker-three-one, hold for the six* –

and he almost regrets it, as there is another crack, and it hits the wall near Castiel's head, splintering stone and spitting dust into his face. He drops back down quick. He rubs at his face with the back of his hand, eyes watering, and then he takes the mouth-piece from Bass.

Down the line, Hester's voice is crackling. “--this is Baker-three-one, do you have contact? Over.”

“Not exactly – contact right from the wall in the town centre, approximately to our three o'clock, but no visual. Suspected lone shooter.” Castiel scrubs again at his eye with his free hand. “And we know he's a shit shot. Over.”

Hester isn't amused. “No visual on this side, either. We're back on the far edge of the south-eastern houses – we're going to continue pushing up from this direction until we make contact. Over.”

“Copy that.” Castiel hesitates. He doesn't like this, but he doesn't have many other options. He glances around at the eight soldiers he has present. Down the far end of the line, Dean has got Hanscum stable and temporarily patched up, and is smiling at him. Castiel takes a deep breath. “We're going to have to do a suicide run on this end to draw fire – over.”

For a moment, the line is quiet. Then: “Roger that. I'll be there as soon as possible, over.”

“No need. I can take care of it.”

“I copy that, but I feel like I should be--”

“Over and out,” Castiel says bluntly, and he passes back the mouth-piece to Bass. He leans forwards to look up and down the line of men pressed to the wall. “We need to do a suicide run. Somner and Sorento, move up – I want Sorento behind that car, Somner up the other end of this wall by that house. Range and elevation unknown, so you need to ensure the largest possible arcs of fire. Observe for muzzle-flash and shoot on sight.”

“Yes, sir.” They move off to their respective positions, keeping low and out of sight, and the sinister yellow lamplight glints off their rifle sights. Castiel watches them go, and tries to squash down the dread settling heavy inside him as he considers who to send.

He looks over the men in front of him, someone sprawled out in prone position to create an all-round defence in case they are out-flanked, some squatting by the wall with Castiel, and then he is distracted, because there is Dean, crouched with his back to the old car. Even in the low light of the distant lamp, Castiel can see that he is smiling. He has his face turned to Hanscum, and his mouth moves quickly as he speaks, and he looks so calm and easy that irritation ignites freshly within Castiel. He speaks without thinking.

“Winchester,” Castiel says. “In your own time.”

Conversation fades out into silence, and as heads lift to look at Castiel in bewilderment, he realises he has made a mistake.

“What?” Dean says.

Castiel stares at him, open-mouthed and breathing slow. Fuck.

He tries to work out whether there is any way back from this. To change his order now is to show self-doubt. To say that he misspoke is

to admit that Winchester distracts him. His mouth is coming up dry.

“To the wall on the far side of the square, please,” he says. There is nothing else he can do. “In your own time.”

Dean's face scrunches up, confused and incredulous. “Sir, I'm a medic.”

Castiel continues to stare at him, and keeps his expression neutral, calm, even as he can feel panic rising in his chest. He has made a mistake. “Congratulations,” he says, and his voice comes out sharp past the fear and uncertainty. “To the other side of the square, please.”

There is another pause; the silence is stretching thin. Castiel's heart is a thunderstorm inside his ribcage. Fuck. If the men make a scene, he doesn't know what he can do. He has fucked this up – he should admit that, but he can't. Shit. He can't. He has to go through with it.

Bass sits up. “Lieutenant, he isn't supposed to--”

“Thank you for your input, private,” Castiel snaps, “although I don't recall having asked for it.”

Bass flinches back, and Castiel feels sick, the guilt and panic pitching in his gut dangerously close to nausea. Bass settles slowly back down into the dirt

Dean's eyes are on Castiel, his expression thinly veiled anger and disbelief. Castiel sets his jaw and ignores it. “In your own time, sergeant.” *Now.*

Dean looks away. His mouth is a thin, tight line.

He takes a moment, pulling the strap of his musette bag over his head to leave his heavy equipment behind. Castiel readies his marksmen to watch for muzzle-flash, and then Dean gets up onto his feet, and he moves. A jog first, finding his feet. Then he runs.

The silence is heavy with threat, anxiety clenching in Castiel's stomach as he waits and waits, seconds stretching into hours. Dean pushes himself faster, sprinting flat-out, and Castiel thinks of their time pulled back to the Conquet peninsula, the two of them running hard for the field gate, all laughter and stupid, stubborn competition-- fuck. Dean is going to be shot dead because of Castiel's idiocy and ridiculous fucking pride, fuck, *fuck*--

There is a deafening crack. Castiel jerks instinctively forwards, the urge to run or scream for him spiking in his gut – and there is a snap of dust up from the ground beside Dean that sends him veering away with a hand thrown up to protect his head, and then, down the other end of the line, Sorento fires.

“Shit,” Sorento mutters frantically, and fumbles to reload. “I don't think I--”

“Again!” Castiel snaps. “Make ready – now!”

Dean is still running but – fuck, is he slowing down? Does he think that the sniper has already been taken out? Castiel clenches his hands into fists so tight that his fingernails sting into his palms. He doesn't dare to breathe.

The sniper lets off another round, and every muscle in Castiel's body coils tight. There is the smashing of a window behind Dean, and this time, Somner is the one who fires.

Somner lifts his head from the scope. “I think I got him, sir.”

Across the town, Dean crashes into the far wall, no time to slow down. Castiel watches him press his back to the stonework, head tipped back to gasp for air; he watches as he sinks to sit on his heels. Castiel lets out his breath.

“Good work,” he says, and he hauls himself upright. He pulls his rifle forwards, and signals for Bass to come back over. “Bass. Get the platoon-leaders on the line and let them know that three-platoon has successfully cleared this side of the square and will be advancing again towards the final objective for an ETA oh-two-hundred-hours.”

“Yes, sir.”

Castiel twists to look down the line for the leader of second squad. “Etheridge – get them formed up and clear through the rest of the hamlet, ready to make contact with second squad so that we can move out as soon as possible. We still have a lot of ground to cover.”

“Yes, sir.”

As the men gather together and continue moving through the town, Castiel heads across to Dean. He doesn't get up; he stays sat on his heels, and he watches Castiel come over with undisguised resentment in his expression. The lamplight casts his face pale-gold, his eyes almost brown in the glow. Castiel stops just in front of him.

“If you have a complaint, you need to air it to me in private,” Castiel says, voice quiet. “You do not argue with a direct order in front of the rest of the men. Do I make myself clear?”

Dean doesn't respond.

Castiel takes a step closer. “I said, do I make mys--”

Dean stands up, and Castiel realises then just how close he put himself to Dean, that there are only inches between them. Dean stands over him, tall and furious, and then, without answering, he turns and he walks away to join the formation. Castiel stares blankly at the stone in front of him where Dean used to be, and he tries to summon the energy for anger. He should run Dean down for that insubordination, and remind him who is in charge here, that he cannot just ignore his superior officer and fucking walk off – but he doesn't feel it. He adjusts his rifle in its sling and, slowly, follows.

They rejoin the rest of three-platoon as they finish clearing the hamlet, and then they're off again through the dark. The sky grows heavy as they walk, clouds unfurling to spill rain lightly first, pattering off the top of Castiel's helmet, and then to pour down upon them.

It seeps through Castiel's combat jacket to leave him cold, skin clammy, and he tightens his hands on his rifle to keep from shivering. Up ahead, he can see the silhouette of one of the men using his rain-wet hands to wipe his face.

They find the other platoons towards the final rendezvous point, and they clear their objective with fifteen minutes to spare. That bothers Castiel. They should have gone slower. They should have cleared the hamlet more slowly. He should have radioed in to the other platoons more regularly to ensure that they were pacing their progress

appropriately. He tries not to think about Cain's pointed comments about Castiel's incompetence – finishing a patrol early is not a catastrophic failure.

At oh-two-fifteen, Baker Company turns back towards the assembly area where the men of the 1st and 2nd Battalion are stationed for the night. By that time, it's coming up to oh-three-hundred, and there's only three hours left until they have to be awake and getting ready to move out again.

Castiel stops them just short of their temporary Battalion CP, runs them through normal safety procedures of their M1s and grease-guns, their light artillery and side-arms. This is usually the point at which they would start weapons-cleaning, but Castiel can tell just by looking at them that they're exhausted, and he doesn't enforce the order. They will get little enough sleep as it is.

They snap to attention, turn to fall out, and then trail sluggishly through loose dirt turning thick with the still-falling rain. Castiel watches them go. He pushes his hands into the pockets of his combat jacket, and he stands there with rain dripping steady from the brim of his helmet.

He is trying to summon the strength to go in search of his billet, to pretend to sleep, when he catches movement out of the corner of his eye. Someone has stayed behind after parade. Without turning to look, Castiel already knows. He keeps his eyes on the diminishing figures of his company in the dark ahead.

“You said earlier that if I wanted to air my concerns about an order, I should do it privately,” Dean says, and his voice, although quiet, is hard. “So here I am. How was that run, sir?” He comes to settle in the mud just off to Castiel's side. “Was it satisfactory to you?”

Castiel doesn't look at him. “Wonderful. Thank you for your cooperation.”

Dean lets all his breath out. “Great. Glad I could help. Now, can we talk about why the fuck you made me do it?”

Castiel looks over his shoulder to meet Dean's eyes, and he finds him pissed off.

“I'm Red Cross, sir,” Dean starts. “You know, it's actually a war crime for them to shoot at me on purpose – unless, of course, I sacrifice my protection by doing something on the offensive. Like, say, maybe, doing a fucking suicide run?”

Castiel raises his eyebrows. “You seem very well-read on the subject.”

Dean shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “Sam did some research into the Geneva Convention when I signed up,” he mutters.

“Good for him.” Castiel looks away again, but Dean interrupts him, steps forwards and gets right into his sight-line.

“I could've been fucking killed,” Dean says, and his voice is low and angry.

And there it is, surfacing again: Dean thinks he is special. Dean thinks he is some kind of exception, that the rules don't apply to him. Castiel's jaw tightens. “Tell me this, Winchester,” he says, his words cold. “Why do you think you deserve special treatment?”

Dean balks at that. Castiel takes a slow step closer.

“Last week I put Richardson on a suicide run. He could've been killed, too. Where were your objections, then?”

Dean opens his mouth, but Castiel doesn't let him speak.

“I put Private Tran on one in Grandcamp, and Lance Corporal Doe at Omaha. I believe Private Morvey took one for that sniper near Coulonces, and unfortunately, he actually was hit. And then there was Private Maier, and--”

“You have a hundred and twenty soldiers here,” Dean interrupts, voice low, and he steps forwards into Castiel's space like a challenge. “You have *three* medics. You have something against me, that's fine, but you cannot afford to lose me. I'm the fucking best you have, and you know it. You need me to keep the company together.”

Castiel holds his eyes. For a moment, he says nothing, but only stares straight back into Dean's fury. When at last he speaks, his voice is soft. “You're doing an excellent job, Winchester, and I thank you for that.” He takes a small step closer. They are near enough that Castiel can count his freckles, distinguish individual, ruffled eyelashes, each drop of rain on catching on the end of his nose. They are breathing the same air. Usually, this is the stage at which Castiel would ache to pull him closer, to kiss him speechless and get his hands worked into Dean's clothes, but today there is anger fizzing underneath his skin, and he only wants to hit him. He wants him to fuck off and never come back. “But do not make the mistake of thinking you're not replaceable.”

Dean doesn't answer.

“Now, I'm going to ask you a couple of questions and I'd like you to answer them. Are you, or are you not, a member of the 29th Infantry Division?”

“Sir, I don't see--”

“Yes or no, sergeant.”

Dean grits his teeth. “Yes, sir.”

“Are you a member of Baker Company, in the 2nd Battalion of the 116th?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And who commands that company?”

“You do, sir.”

“And if your company commanding officer gives you a direct order to get up and do a suicide run, what do you do?”

There is a muscle pulsing in Dean's jaw.

Castiel steps in threateningly close. “I'm sorry, sergeant. I didn't catch that. I'll repeat the question. I said--”

“I get up and do a suicide run, sir,” Dean says, loud, over the rumble of the rain on concrete and metal.

Castiel's eyes flick over Dean with distaste. “That'll be all, sergeant. You're dismissed.”

Dean inhales through his nose, slow and steadying. “Permission to speak, sir?”

“Permission denied.” Castiel holds Dean's eyes. “Get out of my way.”

He doesn't sidestep Dean, then; he keeps his ground, and he waits for Dean to move. It takes a moment – at first it seems as though Dean is not going to give in, and his expression is unreadable – and then Dean takes one short step backwards.

Castiel's heartbeat is deafening inside his ears, pounding so hard he can feel it behind his eyes. He walks past Dean and he doesn't look back.

28th September, 1944

They arrive at their objective just after nineteen-hundred-hours, trucks groaning slowly to a halt just short of a bombed-out town, as grey and desolate-looking as every other town they've driven through since they were made to get off the train at Maastricht. They're piled into scout cars, deuce-and-a-halves – some without tarpaulin coverings, so some unlucky men have been sitting out in the rain for the last hour and a half – and they're stuffed in like sardines, unable to move. Castiel has a dead leg, and pins-and-needles in one foot that he can't shake out.

He stumbles to his feet the instant his truck cuts off the ignition, and

tries not to let show that one foot can barely support him as he climbs down off the back.

“Baker Company, let's go, let's go,” he calls out, moving down the line of vehicles. “Grab your weapons, grab your haversacks, grab whatever equipment you were assigned to take care of from Brest, and get formed up along the side of the road ready to move into the assembly area. I want three rows lined up here in five minutes. Is that clear? You have five minutes.”

There are similar orders being shouted out up and down the line – from Able, up ahead, where Naomi is shouting and waving his hands, all the way to Fox at the far end – and the men start pouring off the backs of the trucks, arms laden with bags and crates. The rain is coming down heavily now, turning the dirt underfoot to quagmire, and Castiel can feel it dripping off the rim of his helmet and down the back of his neck.

As the soldiers of Baker Company get themselves organised, Castiel walks down the line towards First Sergeant Masters.

“First Sergeant,” he says as he approaches. “We need someone to stay out here once the trucks are cleared and do a final sweep to ensure that nothing is left behind.”

Masters raises his eyebrows. “Someone's going to be very grateful for that opportunity,” he says sarcastically, with a brief glance upwards at the heavy black clouds spilling rain.

Castiel is about to reply that it's unpleasant, but unfortunately someone needs to do it, when he sees Dean Winchester getting down from the back of a deuce-and-a-half. He has nothing in his hands, and as Castiel watches, he dusts his hands off on his combat pants, and twists at the waist as though looking for something to do.

“Winchester,” Castiel calls over, and in his peripheral vision, he sees Masters look over in surprise. “It's your lucky day.”

Dean looks up, and the instant he meets Castiel's eyes, his face hardens. “Sir?” he says, voice low, and it sounds like he's telling Castiel to go fuck himself.

“Stay behind to sweep the trucks once they're cleared, then report to the assembly area for further instruction,” Castiel orders, and he doesn't wait for a *yes, sir.* He's not interested in seeing Dean level that look of cold fury at him again – if Dean has a problem, he can be an adult about it and come speak to Castiel privately again. Let him see how far he gets with that.

Castiel turns away, then, and he walks with First Sergeant Masters away down the road to supervise the rest of Baker Company unloading their equipment.

“Once they're all assembled, have Lieutenant Virgil march them up to the assembly area and then set them at ease up there,” Castiel says. “I'm going to find Battalion staff and see if I can find out where we're billeted and what our next move will be.”

“Yes, sir.” Masters pauses for a moment. “Alright. Don't mind me if this is impertinent or whatever, but what exactly is going on with you and Winchester, sir?” Masters asks. “I thought you two were sort of friends or whatever, but--”

“We're not friends,” Castiel interrupts, voice sharp. “And it is impertinent.” He doesn't give Masters the opportunity to dig further; he excuses himself and walks away, through the disorganised throng of newcomers to regimental reserve. He catches sight of Lieutenant

Virgil as he goes past. “Virgil, get them formed up. And try to establish some order, here. They can collect equipment in a queue, not a mob. Platoon by platoon.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lieutenant Shurley falls into step with Castiel as he walks, keeping pace. “Lieutenant Novak – all men present and accounted for, sir.”

“Good. Have you seen battalion staff?”

“No, but I saw the S-3's XO up by Fox, so he might have an idea,” Shurley says.

“Thank you. That'll be all,” Castiel says, and Shurley peels off to return to the company at a shuffling kind of pace, while Castiel continues through the crowd.

He finds Captain Yaring, not by Fox, but standing with one of Dog Company's platoon-leaders, whose name Castiel doesn't remember, and he stands awkwardly nearby until he is noticed. At that point, it is made clear that battalion staff and the other 2nd Battalion CCOs have been waiting for him for some time, past the assembly area in a tent set aside for briefings.

“My apologies, sir – my men only just disembarked the--”

Yaring clears his throat pointedly, interrupting Castiel mid-sentence. “Lieutenant Novak, if I were you, I wouldn't keep them waiting any longer. Maybe you should save your excuses and just get to the briefing ASAP.”

Castiel flushes hot with humiliation, and he avoids the eyes of Dog Company's second lieutenant, who he can tell is looking at him with some amusement. “Yes, sir,” he says, and he takes that as a dismissal. He hurries away.

When Castiel finds the briefing tent, at last, his heart sinks to see that the rest of the commanding officers are already lined up at attention, and the first words out of Major Zachariah Everett's mouth are a pleasant, “Good of you to finally join us, First Lieutenant Novak.”

“Sorry, sir,” he mutters, and gets into place alongside Gabriel, and as soon as he settled, Everett begins.

“Alright, then. Afternoon, gentlemen, and welcome to Holland,” he says. “At ease. I have for you details of your billeting, as well as first patrol orders – I'll give those to you later. For now, it is crucial that you understand what we are undertaking.”

He draws their attention to the table in front of them, laid out with stones and sticks and pieces of paper to represent the local area. Castiel can see the thin thread of the Ruhr river, and some distance behind it, the Rhine. He can see a town called Aachen, marked out with a pen cap as a key objective.

“You know already that the aspects of the 29th are being broken up and reassigned to various divisions. You are acting under General Simpson now, in the XIX Corps, to defend the left flank of the First Army. This will not make much difference to you – you will continue to go through the normal channels of communication. What will make a difference to you, however, is that on General Simpson's orders, the 116th will be shortly commencing a diversion campaign.”

Everett walks around the edge of the sand table and, using his pen, begins to explain their local intelligence.

“This here indicates the Siegfried line. This is a line of obstacles and defensive positions leftover by the Germans from the Great War, now occupied again – dragons' teeth, pillboxes, bunkers, tank traps, you name it, all the way from Kleve to Switzerland. Here's our front-line, just shy of it. Operation Queen will to spearhead here, through the wall, to establish bridgeheads at Julich, Limmich, and Immerath, in order to get into Germany – but in order to do that, we need to push past this fortified line.”

Everett lifts his eyes to look along the line of 2nd Battalions CC0s, expression serious, and it is with a sinking heart that Castiel realises this is not going to be easy.

At his side, Gabriel digs into his combats to pull out a small notebook and the stub of a worn-down pencil; Castiel follows suit.

30th September, 1944

“--sir?”

Castiel blinks and lifts his head. It takes him a second to work out what is happening, but there is a skinny kid in too-big ODs standing over him with a concerned frown, the dim light of dawn behind him. Slowly, Castiel remembers – tossing and turning in the early hours, unable to sleep; heading outside to find a place to sit, in view of the eastern sentry post and the countryside; settling down to smoke. He has no idea how long he has been here.

“My apologies,” he says, and his voice comes out hoarse and bleary. He realises that he has the burnt-out stub of a cigarette still between his fingers, ash scattered all across his knuckles. He drops it, and

grinds it into the dirt under his boot. “I must have fallen asleep. How can I help?”

“We were just looking for you, is all, sir,” the kid says, and Christ, he sounds like Conrad Binyon. Castiel squints at him, trying to work out if there is even the remotest possibility that he's old enough to be drafted. He doesn't know his name. He isn't convinced he's ever even seen him before. “You weren't where you were billeted, so the First Sergeant told me to--”

“Okay. Thank you,” Castiel interrupts. He hauls himself up onto his feet, stifling a groan as his knees creak and pop, stiff from having been sitting immobile for God knows how long. “I'm on my way, Private...”

“Schiavo.”

Castiel does remember him now: a replacement draftee brought in on the 23rd to fill in for those lost at Brest. Castiel hasn't seen him in the field yet, but he's seen him trip over his own feet doing close-order drills, which isn't a promising start.

“Thank you, Private Schiavo.”

He sets off in the direction of Baker Company CP, and as he walks, he checks his watch – oh-six-twenty-two. He came outside to smoke at oh-four-thirty-seven. He tries to work out the math of that, how long he's been asleep, but his brain is clouded over with heavy fog and he can't make the numbers add up.

They have been on regimental reserve here for two days, waiting for orders, just shy of the Siegfried line, and Castiel's fear is growing. The men are going over their old lessons, navigation and open-order drills, assault tactics and pairs-fire manoeuvres, until they're all sick to death

of Hester shouting himself blue in the face - *pepper-pot up the line! You have to pepper-pot up the line!* - and Castiel hangs back to study maps, and write up his company again and again to see if there is any way he can shift his team leaders and NCOs in order to make the overall structure more stable.

By this time, breakfast will be starting at the food truck down by the medical station, but Castiel isn't hungry. He goes instead towards the buildings where one-platoon is billeted, in an old furniture shop with couches and wooden tables piled to either side of the room to clear way for mortar tripods and a sagging, half-empty box of rations. Inside, there are men playing Poker for cigarettes; Private Tran is hunched over writing a letter against his knee, occasionally cursing under his breath as the nib of his pen stabs through the paper; in the corner, First Sergeant Masters is putting a thick layer of polish onto his boots.

“First Sergeant,” Castiel calls. “May I speak with you?”

Masters sets down the boot, and he wipes off his grease-grubby fingers on his combat pants before he climbs to his feet. He crosses the room to greet Castiel. “Morning, Novak,” he says. “How can I help?”

“I was just wondering if we could discuss your reports on the men's fitness following last week's calisthenics exam,” Castiel says, and he walks a short away with him towards the window, shutters thrown wide open to look over a dreary, grey-cobbled street pockmarked by mortar holes. He fishes in the pockets of his combat jacket until he finds the neatly folded sheet of paper.

“Yeah, sure. What's the issue?” Masters says, leaning forwards to peer at the paper.

“Here – where you've listed our weaknesses.” Castiel points. “Hinton,

Morvey, and Rosen... and these replacements, here. What did you mean by that?”

Masters' mouth twists. “Truthfully speaking, the fitness levels of some of the new replacements is terrible. They must just be shipping draftees over here as fast as they can find them – I mean, Renouf can barely do a press-up, and as for running five miles...”

Castiel wants to close his eyes. Replacements instead of NCOs and specialists, and they can't do a fucking press-up. He wants to sleep. He wants to stop doing this. He hasn't slept in two days - with the exception of this morning, if you can count dozing off upright, mid-smoke, as sleeping - and he just wants everything to stop. Just for two fucking seconds, he wants to stop being CO. He wants things to go right for once, without having to run around tidying things up after chaos once again sweeps through. “Alright," he says tiredly. He pinches the bridge of his nose between two fingers, breathing in deep, and he tries to find a way to make this work. "So we'll spread them out to try and minimise their impact on combat effectiveness. What about these ones?”

“Morvey is strong, and he's determined, but he's slower than he used to be, and at the moment you have him in first squad – I was gonna recommend that he be dropped back to second or third.”

“Noted. I'll see what I can do. And Rosen?”

“Excuse me, sir,” comes a voice from behind Castiel, and of course, of everyone it could be, it's Dean fucking Winchester. “I just wanna make sure you know that Morvey rolled his ankle over in Recouvrance, so if he's slow, then that's probably why – he's still good, he just--”

Castiel takes a deep breath, jaw tightening. He doesn't turn around. “Winchester,” he says calmly, past the irritation beating steady inside

his temple because if there is one thing he doesn't fucking need today, it's Dean Winchester thinking he's the smartest man in the northern fucking hemisphere. “I don't believe I was talking to you.”

Dean balks. “Okay, sir, but I was only trying to--”

“You are not a part of this discussion,” Castiel says, and he turns to him. “Do you understand what that means? It means that I am not interested in your contributions, and I don't want to hear them, and so you should not be fucking speaking.”

Dean stares at him.

“Is that understood?” Castiel asks.

Dean's eyes move from Castiel to the First Sergeant, and Castiel can see something pulling tight in his throat as he swallows. “Yes, sir,” he says, and he turns and leaves.

Castiel turns straight back to Masters. “I'm sorry. What were you saying about Rosen?”

Masters' eyes flit between Castiel and the door at his back, eyebrows slightly raised, but if he has an opinion, he doesn't voice it. “I actually wasn't aware about him rolling his ankle over – he must've refused to go to medical, or I would've seen something about it,” Masters says. “Maybe then we don't need to move him – just let him take it easy these next couple of days while we're on reserve and he should be good to go when we get back into action. He's a good soldier – no need to move him around and upset things if he's just a little injured.”

Fuck. So Dean's information was useful, after all. He should've listened to him. The knowledge that he was wrong, again, beats around inside Castiel's skull like an echoing. He sets his jaw.

“We'll consider all options,” he says at last, and he considers that gracious enough. Downstairs, he can hear the front door bang, and then, through the window, he sees Dean heading down the street. Castiel takes a deep breath, and looks away. “Now. Rosen?”

Baker Company has more lessons in the afternoon, prioritising techniques for clearing buildings and moving through urban areas, since a lot of the land they'll be covering in the weeks to come consist of highly industrialised towns. There is a weapons-handling recap, so that the lieutenants can subtly test the replacements to see if their ability to handle a rifle is as weak as their ability to run a six-minute-mile, and then at sixteen-hundred hours, three- and four-platoon are on patrol duty out past the western and northern sides of the assembly area respectively. The other two platoons are enjoying a free afternoon, and Castiel figures he might as well use the down-time to consider reorganising his company, in light of his discussion with First Sergeant Masters.

He is billeted alone, in a abandoned second-storey, one-bedroom house, above a boarded-up post office – close to Company CP, so that he doesn't have far to go, and curiously far from Battalion CP, which he supposes can only be a coincidence. The house is tiny, but it's functional, with cold running water, a bed that looks almost passably clean, and it even has a desk.

Castiel pulls the various small pieces of paper out of his pockets, unfolding them and lying them flat on the bed, and is just about to organise them into piles according to immediate relevance when the door smashes open.

He nearly jumps out of his skin, but before he can say anything, there is Dean, blazing. “What the fuck is your problem?” he says, furious.

Castiel straightens up, chin lifted. “That's Lieutenant to you, Winchester, or *sir,* and I don't recall you asking to come in, either.”

Dean stares him down angrily. “Okay – requesting permission to come in, Lieutenant Asshole.”

Castiel sets down his papers, and turns to face Dean full on. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What's wrong with me?” Dean repeats incredulously. “Seriously, what's wrong with – no, what the fuck is wrong with you? I thought we were gonna stay professional about this, for Christ's sake.”

“About what?”

Dean makes a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. “Don't play dumb with me, you know damn well what,” he says, and he steps forwards, with one finger lifted to point into Castiel's face, accusatory. “You got jealous.”

Castiel's eyes narrow. “Bullshit.”

“Bullshit? Really? Because to me it looked like I was being screwed around with wild goose chases to medical supply runs that aren't even happening, and to gunner positions that didn't freaking want me, and endless shitty duties, and goddamn fucking suicide runs, barely ten minutes after I fucked that nurse.”

In spite of everything – avoiding Dean, behaving out of spite and

anger towards him - Castiel has been trying not to think about it. Hearing the words out of Dean's mouth makes it a hundred times worse, and it twists sickeningly in Castiel's stomach.

In a second, it all comes back to him – the small of Dean's back, freckled and pale; the Red Cross helmet discarded on the concrete; *yeah, God, fuck, like that* – and Castiel says angrily, “Because this is a goddamn war-zone, Winchester. You shouldn't have time to be fucking off-duty nurses.”

Dean scoffs, and the sound of it is so alien to Castiel – bitter, angry – that it raises goosebumps on the back of his neck. “Oh yeah?” Dean says. “I had enough time to fuck you, didn't I?”

Castiel feels it like a punch to the gut. For several seconds he just stares at Dean, speechless. When he finally remembers how to speak, all he manages is, “That's different.”

“The fuck is it different,” Dean snaps. “Jesus Christ. You're such a hypocritical sack of shit, you know that? I don't know if anyone has ever told you this, but God, you are a real fucking asshole. I can't believe this. After everything I've fucking done – all this tiptoeing around your stupid fucking boundaries, taking it every time you fucking turn on me because I got too close – and after everything, you just cut me out. You cut me out and you decide we're done, just like that, and then, I swear to God, you have the fucking nerve to bitch me out for turning to someone else. Jesus.” It gets worse: Dean starts laughing. He rubs a hand down over his mouth, and he laughs, and Castiel, on two hours' sleep in as many days, is starting to feel as though the room is spinning. “Fuck. And all this time I've actually been defending you, I've been saying to myself, *it's okay, he just gets angry when he's upset, he just lashes out when he feels trapped,* but no. You're just a dick. You're just a spineless fucking coward who--”

Castiel hits him.

He doesn't know how it happens, only that one moment he is breathing steady to keep himself calm, hands curled tight into fists at his sides, and the next moment his vision is white at the edges, hot, and he's shaking so hard he feels like he's out of control of his own body, and he punches Dean hard enough that his head snaps back – and then again, and once more.

He hauls Dean forwards by the collar, hits him so hard that he feels his knuckles split, and then suddenly, in the moment between Dean being punched and reeling forwards again, Dean's knee comes up fast and collides with Castiel's sternum so hard that all the air is crushed out of Castiel's lungs, and as he doubles over, Dean kicks his knee out as hard as he can, and Castiel goes down.

Castiel hits the floor hard, half-sprawling on his ass, and it feels as though something inside his chest is seizing up as he drags in a deep, wheezing gasp.

“Christ.” Dean spits out a mouthful of blood. “You can tell you fought with rich kids. Good hit, though.”

Castiel hauls himself up onto his hands and knees, slowly. Usually getting knocked down just makes him angrier, but it's been a long time and he just feels tired. He doesn't want to get up at all. He doesn't want to fight anymore.

As he watches, Dean touches a thumb to his split lip and winces. “Shit. That's gonna hurt,” he says, off-hand. “You know that if I told anyone this happened, you'd get court-martialled, right?”

“If you want me to lose my job, you should open with the part where I had your dick in my mouth,” Castiel mutters, and his voice comes out

raspy, almost inaudible. He is still kneeling on the floor. “That'll get their attention much faster.”

Dean lets out a long breath. “I don't want you to lose your job.”

“So don't tell anyone what happened.”

“Sir.”

Castiel sits back on his heels, slow and defeated. He slumps. “What?”

Dean is silent for a moment. He has blood coming off his nose and mouth. Castiel doesn't know whether it's Dean's or his own, his knuckles broken and stinging.

Dean says, “It wasn't my fault.” He doesn't elaborate. He doesn't need to.

Castiel can't look at him.

“And I may not have known him real well, but I think he deserves better than being used as a fucking excuse,” Dean goes on, and his voice turns sharp now. “I get that you think I should've been there, I should've saved him, but I saw him. In the aid station. And I'm sorry to say this, but he was fucked. There was nothing anyone could have done, and I don't see you getting this pissed at Ted and Nolan – because they weren't there either. I'm not the only medic in the fucking company, remember? I'm the one trying to look out for you, and I'm the one getting fucked over. That sound fair to you?”

Castiel doesn't answer. He doesn't say, *it's because of you I lost him, I couldn't have both and I chose you.* He doesn't say that he's changed his mind.

“So, respectfully, lieutenant,” Dean says, and he's said it before, he's said a thousand times, but it has never sounded like this before – like a warning. “You need to get your shit together.”

Castiel doesn't know why he says it. He listens to all this, and even as he realises that he's a fucking asshole and he doesn't deserve Dean's patience, that he's fucked this up like he fucks up everything, somehow his mouth is still working without him, and he mutters, “What about Elise Braeden?”

Dean stares at him, bewildered. “What?”

Castiel knows that he needs to shut the fuck up, but he can't. “Elise Braeden,” he repeats, louder now, even though his voice is scratched rough and he can barely breathe. “What about--”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Dean demands. “Everything I've just said, and that's what you're gonna say to me right now?”

Castiel doesn't know what else to say. All he knows is that provoking Dean to hate him more is easier than trying to find the courage to say that he's sorry. He doesn't answer.

“Jesus,” Dean says, and there it is again – that low, bitter laugh like everything is ruined beyond repair and he doesn't know they got here. Castiel doesn't blame him. “Jesus fucking Christ. You arrogant fuck.”

Castiel is sat on his heels on the floor, looking at the grimy floorboards just in front of Dean's feet, and his hands sit useless in his lap, bloody and mangled, and he is shaking. He swallows past the thickness rising in his throat, and he doesn't look at Dean.

“She made me feel good,” Dean says at last, his voice hard. “Is that what you want to hear? She even let me kiss her while we were doing it. And you know what – I didn't feel like something dirty she'd stepped in afterwards.”

Castiel clenches his jaw tight, blinks hard as the backs of his eyes start up aching. He says nothing – just sits there and waits until, at last, Dean swears under his breath again, and he goes out.

Castiel hears Dean's every step as he heads down the stairs, old creaking tiredly beneath his weight, and then he is gone, leaving silence in his wake. Castiel stays where he is for a long time. He sits on the floor, pulling his knees up to his chest, and he doesn't cry, but he wants to.

Chapter 13: Alsdorf-Herzogenrath

1st October, 1944

Dear Sam,

Look, I said I don't really wanna talk about it. I got in a fight, okay, that's all you need to know. I'm fine. And Joe's doing really well, too, by the way. Not that you ever ask about Joe, or anybody else, but whatever, hey, maybe you want to stalk all the guys in the company instead of just the CO. First Lieutenant Novak is doing just great. He's my company commanding officer and he's doing an excellent job. I have nothing to say beyond that. I'm not his fucking babysitter. You want to know more, write to him yourself.

We're moving up soon to [redacted], and apparently it's gonna be a hell of a lot different to what we're used to. I guess since it's [redacted], the civilians aren't gonna be so friendly, at least. Less countryside, more concrete, from what I hear. Flatter. And no more freaking hedgerows, so thank Christ for small mercies, I guess. Charlie's still being optimistic as shit – he's added Holland and Belgium now to his seed collection, so he's gonna have a hell of a diverse garden if he ever makes it back. I gotta say I'm rooting for him though. Get it? Rooting? Christ, I'm a gas. I gotta tell that one to Charlie.

Congrats on doing so well! You thought about where you're gonna apply when you're a big grown-up real lawyer? Can't be too far from Lawrence, okay? I'll have a real hard time bugging you about whether you're eating your vegetables if you up and move somewhere place stupid a hundred miles away. I know it sounds glamorous, but there's nothing wrong with the Midwest, even if Dad is driving you crazy. And hey – if he's disappeared again, at least you won't have to worry about him yelling at Jess. Which reminds me: hi Jess. I get by now that Sam's gonna read this to you, so I figure now's a good time to tell you about how Sammy gets real bad wind when he eats eggs, so if you value your life then keep him away from omelettes, you hear me?

Alright, I gotta go. When Dad does eventually show up, remind him he's got two sons, will you? I know the one in Europe's not as interesting as the lawyer, but I could do with talking to him. Take care of yourself, and good luck with your applications. Johnny says hi. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

4th October, 1944

Castiel hears about it only thirty-seven hours before Baker are due to move: Kerkrade, north-east by ten miles, heavily occupied. He had promised his men at least forty-eight hours' notice.

First thing that morning, Baker Company gets formed up in the drizzling grey, and he tells them. To their credit, no-one says a word of complaint, just nod their heads all *yes, sir, yes, sir* – but he could see the dread and disappointment ripple through the men like a slow-cresting wave. There it is in the slump of shoulders, the lowering of eyes, the reluctant twist of the mouth, the scuffing of feet. They are quietly resigned, and Castiel thinks, not for the fifth time that day, that he doesn't want to take them back into combat.

They have lost so much already, and they are going to go on losing more. There is Zeddmore, with a hole in his collarbone that makes him wince every time he moves, and there is Milligan, with a burn scar creeping across his face; there is Private Roth favouring his left leg, and Corporal Mills holding his rifle gingerly since he dislocated his shoulder, and there is Dean.

Word around the company is that Dean lost a bet with Bradbury. He has a black eye, a split lip, slight bruising around his jaw, but so far

Castiel hasn't heard anyone calling bullshit on whether Bradbury even has that kind of force in him. He doesn't know know what Dean told Bradbury to get him to go along with it. He doesn't care, as long as he still has his job.

They don't talk about it. In fact, they don't talk at all. Castiel is once again avoiding him, and it's because he has gone out of his way to ensure that he has no unnecessary contact with Dean that it took him longer than it should have to realise that Dean has been avoiding him as well.

Medical reports are passed on to him by Ted du Mort and Nolan Fitzgerald only; on parade, Dean is last to arrive and first to leave, and he always stands as he does now, at attention with his eyes fixed on a space somewhere above Castiel's head the whole time. Castiel is big enough now to admit, at least to himself, that this is not what he wanted.

Thankfully, their paths don't cross too much at the moment. Dean hangs around primarily with the enlisted men – Harvelle, Mills, Bradbury, Tran – and Castiel, as a rule, stays away from them. They are brought together only in a professional capacity, and that only occasionally, and for the rest of the time, Castiel keeps to himself.

He dismisses them to go about the rest of day as usual, with the exception of calisthenics at seventeen-hundred hours, which has been cancelled. This reprieve seems to give the men some relief until they realise that it's only cancelled so that they can have a briefing on their action plan, and somehow, against all odds, it's this, and not the threat of going back onto the front-line, that has Ash Lowell groaning at the back.

The men turn on their heels as one and fall out, and Dean is gone so fast that Castiel can't be sure he was here at all.

5th October, 1944

Fuckin' butcher, Cas – don't--

Castiel sits upright and gasps for air, and it takes several long seconds for him to recognise that he's okay.

He sits there for a long time, legs splayed, struggling to breathe, and his chest pulls tight, like hands digging into his sternum and peeling his ribs apart. He closes his eyes. He counts to ten. He flexes his left hand, stretching his fingers until his joints ache. He doesn't think about-- he doesn't think. He tries very hard not to.

It is oh-one-fifty-six. He has been asleep for just under forty minutes. He has a little more than an hour until he was supposed to be awake. He pulls on his boots.

Dawn is due to break around oh-six-hundred, but the men of the 2nd Battalion come pouring out into the streets around oh-three-fifteen, by which time Castiel has been awake and wandering for longer than he knows what to do with himself. The morning is chill without the light, and his hands are cold even inside his combats' pockets.

They all know what they need to be doing – they've been briefed, and they're ready. They line up, platoon by platoon, for their normal safety procedures, testing their rifles and machine-guns and lifting them up onto one shoulder as Lieutenant Virgil calls out *for inspection, report arms*. Castiel gets them on parade and calls out the groupings for each transport – one truck per squad, with all their equipment. Officers and platoon sergeants in wherever they will fit afterwards, and only once everyone else is accounted for. They bring out haversacks and musette bags, ammunition and rations, spare cleaning kits and LSW tripods,

boxes of light artillery shells, first-aid kits, mortar-stands.

The deuce-and-a-halves are lined up waiting, administrative officers and supply men coming forwards to help pack things into the backs of the trucks, and there is shouting from all the way down the road as each squad numbers off loudly before climbing in the backs of their transport, and when Castiel glances down the road, he can see the whole thing repeating a hundredfold as the entirety of the 116th gets ready to move out. They won't be back here any time soon.

Castiel walks a slow path along the length of the company, watching the movement and bustle to check that everyone is busy, everyone knows what they're doing. As he nears one-platoon, he catches sight of a single figure, standing motionless ten yards or so back from the trucks.

Dean stands with his hands in the pockets of his combat pants, his shoulders hunched over against a cold wind that rushes through the town and snaps at the tarps over the deuce-and-a-halves.

Castiel watches him for a moment, the way he shifts impatiently on the balls of his feet, the way he occasionally rolls one ankle over, slow and deliberate, as though to stretch a muscle. Castiel should go and speak to him, he knows that much. Dean should be on one of the transports by now. Castiel doesn't want to approach him, though. He doesn't want to speak to him, because he knows that every word out of his mouth will just piss Dean off further, and rightly so. It's been a long time since Castiel said anything worth listening to.

He takes a deep breath to steel himself, and he sets off across the road.

Dean knows that Castiel is coming – his shoulders stiffen, and he becomes more still. He doesn't look over.

Castiel comes to stand beside him. “Why aren't you getting on the transport?” He nearly slips into the stilted speech of an officer, nearly calls him *sergeant.* He stops himself just in time.

Dean doesn't look at him. “I'm on stand-by for Lieutenant Virgil. He'll be back soon.”

Castiel nods. He feels awkward and he doesn't know where to start. He should probably just give up now and walk away, but he can't bring himself to do that. Up ahead of them, Lieutenant Hester is counting off three-platoon, truck by truck.

“What happened to your face?” Castiel asks, at last, as though he doesn't know.

Dean makes a soft sound in the back of his throat, a noise halfway between a laugh and something darker. “Lost a bet,” he says flatly.

“A bet,” Castiel repeats.

“I said if Bradbury could beat me at Spite and Malice, then he could take his best shot.”

Castiel isn't convinced. He turns to Dean, opening his mouth to ask what Dean told him, whether he's sure Bradbury can be trusted – but Dean speaks first.

“It's okay,” he says, and he sounds tired. “I told him I provoked you, which I did, and that to some extent I probably deserved it, which I'm

still working out – and I mean, I also told him I fucked your knee up, so."

Castiel doesn't even try to argue that his knee is fine. The bruising has gone black, and the swelling still hasn't gone down. He's trying not to limp, and it fucking hurts. He's trying not to hold it against Dean, even when there are parts of him quietly furious – because he hit Dean in the face, sure, but Dean doesn't need his fucking face in combat, whereas Castiel actually needs his knees to be fully functional. He reminds himself that he hit Dean first.

"It's fine," Dean says, taking Castiel's long silence for something else. "Charlie can be discreet."

Castiel doesn't say anything. He isn't so sure. He likes Bradbury, as he's not only a nice man but a good soldier, if a little erratic with over-enthusiasm at times – and while he trusts Bradbury with his life, in the implicit way of combat, he by no means trusts him with his career.

"Don't worry," Dean says, and his voice is different now. Harder. "Your precious career is safe."

Castiel's stomach turns over. He hates that, instantly, Dean knows. He wants to apologise, but he doesn't know how. He looks at the black ridge of Dean's eye socket, his bloodshot eye, the faint green and yellow swelling around his ear, and he doesn't think he could ever find the words to say *I never meant to do this to you.* He wants to say that when he spoke to Dean, he hadn't slept more than three hours in as many days, that he was starting to feel like the walls were shaking. He wants to say that every time he hears someone drop a box, or a scout car backfiring, something seizes in his chest and he can't breathe and he can barely remember where he is.

He knows they're only hollow excuses, though. He doesn't say anything. Dean deserves better than Castiel's useless attempts to justify himself.

Castiel is quiet for so long that Dean glances over, and then Castiel can't stop looking at him. Dean doesn't look angry anymore – just exhausted. The line of his mouth is a little crumpled, hurt and sad and so fucking tired, and for the first time since Recouvrance, when Castiel aches, now, to be close to him, he doesn't squash it down with anger.

For a moment, it looks as though Dean is going to say something, but before he can so much as open his mouth, there is Lieutenant Virgil coming towards them. “Sergeant Winchester,” he calls across. “I've got the full list here. Thank you for holding fire with that.”

Dean pulls some paper from his pocket and goes to follow Virgil away to the line of deuce-and-a-halves, but not before he says, “No problem, sir.” It's the most politely respectful tone Castiel's ever heard him use on an officer, and it sours in Castiel's stomach.

6th October, 1944

Kerkrade was mostly liberated by the time the 116th got there, and so it's easy picking.

There was estimated to be no more than one German company remaining in the town: some hundred or so men, run down, cut off, and tired, against an entire American infantry regiment. The Germans had the tactical advantage, knowing their surroundings, the back-routes and side-alleys, so that they could slip away to their next position whenever the US military got too close, so they still had to be careful, but by the end of their first day occupying the position, the city is cleared.

It's no victory of theirs – the 120th Infantry did all the hard work for them, and then pulled out just in time to lose the glory. They're not staying long, either. First thing in the morning, they are due to move out again towards Alsdorf, pushing the front line east.

Before that, however, there are things to be taken care of: prisoners to be processed, intelligence to be gathered; enemy weapons caches to sort and store. The men of Baker Company, along with the rest of the 2nd Battalion, are back to being what Gabriel affectionately refers to as *admin bitches.* Cleaning up other people's messes.

The afternoon passes slowly, dragging its heels, and then at sixteen-forty, Castiel gets First Sergeant Masters and Lieutenant Shurley to help him in assembling a briefing space. They find some chairs to fit into the room, some half-broken, and none of them comfortable, but the fact that they find any and get them into the tiny room at all is a testament to human resilience. Castiel has a splinter in his thumb.

Sixteen-fifty. The men of Baker come piling in, and Castiel unfolds his map at the front of the room.

He tells them the plan – to move out at dawn to the east, with the goal of pushing the American front-line east through Herzogenrath as far as Alsdorf, so that the XIX Corps can try to encircle Aachen – a German city with little in the way of military power, but immense symbolic significance to the Germans, which can apparently no longer just be controlled by investment. It needs to be captured outright. Major Campbell mentioned something about the founder of the First Reich, but Castiel doesn't remember. It isn't important; a target is a target. Castiel drills them with the details of known enemy positions, Panzer brigade movements, Luftwaffe strikes, and what the terrain will be like: urban fighting, close quarters combat. Like Brest, so they'll have to be careful. Castiel feels nausea twist in his gut even as he says it.

Castiel finishes up with making clear any finalised shifts within the company and within the platoons – Harvelle and Doe over to two-platoon, to be replaced in one-platoon by Corporal Somner and two new replacements: Somner in first squad, the replacements in third, and so on – and then he snaps the cap back onto his ink pen and looks out across the room at his company. Something faintly dark moves in the corner of his eye; he glances over to follow it, but finds nothing there. He looks slowly back over to his men, vaguely unsettled; he clears his throat. “We'll be moving out before first light tomorrow, so I want everyone formed up in the square and ready to go at oh-four-hundred hours. Platoon-leaders, ensure you have your watches synchronised and that your men are organised tonight – I don't want a panic in the morning when things are being left behind.”

“Yes, sir,” comes back to him four-fold.

“Alright. That'll be all.” Castiel comes to attention as his men get up out of their seats and start up talking – about the shitty weather and how they're going to be outside in it; about how they aren't going to get a chance to win back their money from last night's card game – and he catches sight of Dean, at the back. He is mid-conversation with Bradbury and Tran as he stows his notebook away into his combat jacket. Castiel hesitates. “Sergeant Winchester,” he says, and he sees Dean's head lift at the back of the room. He keeps his voice professional and neutral, but he takes great care not to let it become cold. He is so preoccupied with maintaining the right tone of voice that he stumbles over his words. “Would you – if you could – stay behind a moment. Sergeant.”

Tran throws Dean a frown, but he shrugs it off, and Bradbury – because Castiel would not admit it, but he's watching Bradbury closely these days – says nothing. He doesn't so much as raise his eyebrows, and he steps past Dean to head out of the room.

Castiel breathes, calm and steady, through his heartbeat drumming heavy. He steps forwards and neatens one of the chairs at the front of the room that has been skewed. There are still a couple of men filing slowly out of the room, but Castiel doesn't wait for them to leave; it's

not as though he and Dean are sneaking around anymore.

“Sergeant,” he starts, and it comes out wrong. He clears his throat. “If you have some free time, I'd like to discuss something with you.”

Dean's eyes flash to the handful of soldiers still making their way out of the door – confused, Castiel supposes, by his frankness. He settles his hands on the back of the chair in front of him, leaning forwards, and he is quiet for a moment that seems to last and last. Then, finally, once the room is clear, he speaks. “Is this a professional matter, or a personal one?”

Castiel hesitates. “Personal.”

“Oh, okay. So I can speak freely, then.” Dean speaks calmly, as though discussing the weather. He holds Castiel's eyes. “Go fuck yourself, Novak.”

Castiel can't say he wasn't expecting that. He doesn't give up, though. He forces himself through it. “Please.”

Dean's fingers tap against the wood of the chair, awkward and without rhythm. He tilts his body away, leaning on the chair heavily, and he looks down at his hands. He is quiet for a long time. Then, just as the anxiety spiking in Castiel's gut is tipping him somewhere close to nausea, Dean mutters, “When?”

“After dinner, perhaps,” Castiel says. “Nineteen-thirty hours, at Company CP.”

“I'm busy, then,” Dean says.

Castiel blinks. “Busy with what?”

Dean's mouth twists, and he looks towards the door. “What do you care?”

“Winchester, I'm--”

“Yeah, I get it. You're my CO, and you're entitled to know everything I'm doing at every fucking moment. But this isn't a professional conversation. And *personally,* I want to reserve the right to not tell you. I think I deserve that.”

Castiel lets out his breath. He is practising the art of compromise. He returns his gaze to Dean, unsettled. “What about after?”

Dean meets his eyes. “After?”

“You said you're busy at nineteen-thirty,” Castiel says tentatively. “So. What about after?”

Dean studies him. He seems suspicious. “Fuck. What the hell,” he says, eventually, and he straightens up. “Okay. Sure.”

Some of the pressure built up inside Castiel's chest eases, and he lets out a breath that feels weighted. “Thank you,” he says, and he means it. “When do you finish?”

“Around twenty-two-hundred, I think.”

Castiel nods. “Alright. I'll see you then, sergeant.”

“Sure thing, lieutenant.” Dean says the rank like an insult, and when Castiel straightens to dismiss him, Dean walks out without saluting. He adjusts his helmet with one hand as he steps out into the street, and then he is gone.

Castiel lets out his breath slowly. He starts to move chairs back to his original position, ignoring the dull twinge in the bad shoulder as he shifts furniture.

In the hours to fill before twenty-two-hundred, Castiel has a lot to do. He has to write up an action report for the day, detailing all patrol movements, all old enemy positions cleared. He has to pack his own things, to the highest standard and ensuring that nothing is left behind or misplaced. He has to strip and clean his rifle, and he has to run by the platoons to supervise that packing and preparations are running smoothly – an impromptu kit and quarters inspection might not be a bad idea. He has to go down to Battalion for one last briefing, prior to moving out, and he has to check communications with the other company COs, so that they aren't split up in the field. He should probably get dinner at some point amongst all that, as well.

It doesn't take the five hours needed to fill the time until twenty-two-hundred as Castiel had hoped but he doesn't manage to fit dinner in, either. It's fine – he's used to missing meals. It's more of an expectation than a surprise, in the field, and even if he's not in the field at the moment, he is getting very good at blurring that line. He's never off-duty, so it might as well be combat.

Castiel returns to Company CP with his haversack packed, his webbing reorganised, his rifle clean and well-oiled – and he still has ten

minutes to spare. He passes them with checking and double-checking his compass against his map. He passes the ten minutes that follow after in the same way. And the five.

It doesn't matter that Dean is late. He had a job to do, and that must be prioritised. One of the medical officers probably needed Dean's help for something else after the re-supply. Dean will be here as soon as he's able. Castiel checks his watch. Dean isn't even terribly late, he tells himself, and Castiel is learning to compromise. He can be patient.

He tries not to pace. He goes to his makeshift desk, and he reorganises the various bits of paperwork strewn across the desktop, and he neatens his two pencils into a clean line. He considers, for the first time, the implications of having asked Dean to meet him at Company CP, which have the time doubles as his quarters, and realises Dean might think this is some kind of sexual invitation. Castiel could kick himself. Jesus Christ. He should have picked neutral ground. Fuck. He must know, though, that Castiel only wants to talk to him. In spite of all that is lost between, Dean must know that Castiel would never expect that of him. Is that why he's late?

Castiel checks his watch again. Nineteen minutes late.

Castiel can feel himself growing increasingly agitated, and so he sits and flicks through the reports on his desk. There's no use letting himself become ridiculous as he waits; it will calm his nerves to be busy, and he might as well get something useful done. He has here the rough notes from Lieutenant Shurley's after-action report on two-platoon's movements through Heerlerbaan – nearly illegible, and smelling faintly of alcohol, but nonetheless complete. Castiel makes a start on transcribing it into a format that Major Campbell wouldn't be appalled to behold, but it takes less than ten minutes, and there is still no sign of Dean when he is finished.

Castiel reviews his other reports, and updates his map with regards to the latest movement and fluctuation of the German front against the

Westwall. Once, the door into the CP swings loudly to bang against the wall, and Castiel gets up so suddenly that he almost knocks over his chair, but it is only the wind.

It's twenty-two-forty-six hours, and Dean is nowhere to be seen.

Castiel lights a cigarette. He flicks distractedly at the corner of his cigarette tin with his free hand as he inhales smoke, and he is patient. He is not concerned about Dean's whereabouts – until he is, and his nerves are ratcheting tight as violin strings, and the smoke in his lungs doesn't make him more steady as he swings from fear to fury and back again. He hauls up his M1 from the side of the desk and, with his cigarette clenched tight between his lips, he walks out into the dark.

Castiel heads for the hospital tent. The night is low and foggy, dark beyond the lamplight, with the sky overhead thick and heavy with rain. Somewhere in the next row of tents, he can hear an officer sharply giving a dressing-down; past the mess hall, a handful of NCOs from the 30th Infantry are working under the hood of a battered scout car.

There is a single, dimly-lit lamp in the hospital doorway, and as Castiel approaches, a man comes out scrubbing at his hands with a small rag. He is bloody up to the wrists. He hears Castiel coming, and he lifts his eyes. “Evening, lieutenant,” he says. “How can I help?”

Castiel comes to stop in front of him. “I'm looking for a Winchester – T-4 combat medic.”

The man frowns thoughtfully. “He one of the guys on equipment re-supply, sir?”

“That's correct.”

“Yeah, we let 'em all go a while ago – about an hour and a half now. Just after twenty-one-thirty.”

Castiel stares at him. He isn't sure he's understood that right.

The man balls up his rag and stuffs into the pocket of his combats. His hands are still darkly stained. “Is there anything else I can help you with, sir?” he asks.

“No,” Castiel says. “Thank you. That'll be all.”

The man nods, and then salutes; Castiel lifts a hand to his brow in return and then turns on his heel to walk away. He doesn't know where he's going, but he can't stay here.

Forty minutes ago. This is unthinkable. Either something has happened to Dean, or he has forgotten. Castiel walks slow and steady, his head swimming with everything he had planned to say and rehearsed a hundred times over. *Dean, I have been rash, and immature, and unprofessional. My behaviour has been thoughtless. I regret having put you in danger, and I hope you can forgive me.* Castiel feels disoriented.

It's too late now to go by the enlisted men's barracks to look for him, and he's fairly certain that doing so would be wildly unprofessional anyway – unless he could track down First Sergeant Masters to pass on a message – but who is to say that Dean would even be there? Something terrible might have happened. He doesn't know what to do.

Castiel finds himself some fifty feet or so the wrong side of the building where he is billeted, and he turns back. A light drizzle has started up, pattering off the top of his helmet, and when he ducks

through the front door to climb the stairs up to the second storey, the rain has built to a low roar against the stone. He half-expects to see Dean waiting there for him; he doesn't find him.

He palms off his helmet, and closes the shutters against the rain.

7th October, 1944

"--Novak!"

Castiel jerks awake with a small, startled noise, and for a moment he is horribly disoriented, and then everything becomes clear in front of him – the concrete walls of Battalion CP, the map spread out across the table, the other CCOs at his sides, Major Campbell in front of him with a face like thunder.

"Sorry, sir," Castiel manages as he tries to blink the world back into focus.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Campbell demands, right in his face, and Castiel keeps his expression calm and neutral as he desperately fights to remember what is happening. 2nd Battalion is pushing up through the Herzogenrath line towards Alsdorf today, and they have updated intelligence on enemy positions nearby, and – and – Castiel doesn't know. Everyone is staring at him, their expressions somewhere between bewilderment and disbelief. In his peripheral vision, Castiel can see Lieutenant Cain trying not to smile.

"It was an accident, sir, I'm sorry," Castiel says stiffly.

"It was an accident – yeah, I should sure as shit hope you wouldn't fall

asleep in the middle of a briefing to be deliberately insubordinate, First Lieutenant."

Humiliation prickles underneath Castiel's skin like a heat-rash, his jaw and ears coming up hot as he stares straight past Campbell, spine straight, head high. "It won't happen again, sir."

"You're right. It won't," Campbell snaps. "Get your shit squared away, Novak."

Castiel sets his jaw. "Yes, sir," he says, even as his face is burning.

Campbell eyes him, suspicious, but he seems satisfied that Castiel has been sufficiently dressed down, and he returns to the briefing, outlining the route each company will be taking as they continue to push east.

Castiel listens, and he stays tensed up as though Campbell could turn on him again at any moment. He locks his knees even as he stands at ease – the one knee that Dean kicked out throbbing painfully underneath him – and he clutches his hands tight together behind his back, terrified of relaxing for long enough to fall asleep again.

He doesn't know what happened to him; he doesn't even remember having been tired enough to drop off. Of course, he was tired, but he's always tired – he wasn't especially exhausted. He should have been fine. His eyes ache and there is a dull pounding in the centre of his forehead that presses for attention. He just needs to keep busy, that's all.

When they are finally dismissed, Castiel turns and leaves immediately, even as the other commanding officers turn to each other to discuss their next moves. He gets on well enough with a few of them – he

likes Gabriel, and Naomi is tolerable as long as no-one brings up the dress standards – but he doesn't want to talk to anyone now. He isn't in the mood to hear *what's wrong? Are you okay? What happened?* and he isn't in the mood to try and explain that nothing is wrong with him, he's absolutely fine, he just hasn't been sleeping well. He knows the way people talk; back in England, he heard men talking about veterans come back from North Africa – saying that you get no sleep in combat, you're tired all the time, but some guys, they can't sleep at all even when they get the time, they can't stay awake in the day-time, and that's when they've gotta go. He doesn't need to give anyone any more reason to think that he can't cope.

The humilation of Major Campbell's dress-down is still searing underneath Castiel's skin. He can't shake the feeling of that awful, disorienting moment when he snapped back to reality with no idea where he was or what he was doing; he can't erase from his brain the awkward silence of the other COs, Lieutenant Cain's slight smile. Castiel presses his mouth into a tight line, lets out all his pent-up breath through his nose, and tries to stop thinking about it. That doesn't matter now. It won't happen again.

He heads down to the square early, ready to wait for the first of his men to show up so that he can start organising for the march to Alsdorf, but then, as he rounds the corner, he sees Dean.

He doesn't look ill, or injured; he doesn't look as though he was taken prisoner by Krauts. He looks somewhat tired, but then again, they all do. Castiel is walking towards him. He thinks, distantly, that he should ignore Dean for a time, pretend that he is occupied and he has a hundred more important things to think about, and then finally, finally, bring his attention to Dean with calm and insouciance, as though he'd entirely forgotten about him – but that doesn't happen. Castiel is walking quickly towards him in long strides, and Dean looks up when he is less than ten feet from him, and Castiel says, “Where the hell were you?”

Dean rolls his weight from one leg to the other, and his mouth twists. “Oh, sorry,” he says, and he doesn't sound sorry at all. He smoothes

his hands down the sides of his combat jacket, picks at the hem – he almost looks bored. “Something urgent came up.”

Castiel comes to a halt in front of him, toeing the line somewhere between incredulous and just plain fucking angry. “Like what?”

Dean lets out a long, slow sigh. “Like, I didn't want to come.”

“Excuse me?” Castiel says, before he can stop himself – he's always said it's a useless phrase, the last resort of a powerless man, but he doesn't know what else to do. There is that same old feeling catching light inside him, humiliation burning all through his skin and turning sour, to irritation, to fury.

“Yeah, I just didn't feel like seeing you.” Dean gives a loose shrug, twists his head over to one side as though he already wants to get out of this conversation. “I dunno. I knew you would want to talk it out, and I couldn't deal with the effort, so I just decided to avoid y--”

Castiel surges forwards into Dean's personal space, anger snapping hotly in his gut. “Go fuck yourself, Winchester,” he snarls, voice low.

He was willing to change, to compromise, and he was going to apologise, or at least make some kind of gesture that falls somewhere close to an apology – close enough for Dean to understand that he regrets what he did – and here, again, is Dean with his lazy sense of superiority, his arrogance and carelessness. Castiel's eyes catch on the red of Dean's split lip, the dimly yellowing bruises, and he is breathing unsteady, but he can't hit him again, so he clenches fists tight and he wheels around to walk away.

He leaves in quick, decisive strides, trying to put as much distance between himself and Dean before he does something stupid. He

doesn't run. He counts the beat of his footsteps, wanting to use it to calm himself down, but each step is punctuating another hot burst of anger, and he is trying to breathe and thinking, *how dare he, how fucking dare he. When I only wanted to talk to him and address my mistakes, and he just cuts and runs, avoids me and then cuts me out for no reason, when I didn't even do anything wrong, and then--*

Castiel slows, then stops.

He has not yet made it ten steps, and already he knows. He still has his back turned to Dean, and for several seconds he stays there, motionless. He can feel the way his shoulders are pulled up tight and tense, already coaxing a cramp into the muscle, and he wants to relax it away, but he doesn't know how. He can't make himself calm. He can't bring himself to turn back around.

Castiel stands with his back to Dean, and he breathes. As ever, Dean is patient. Castiel is starting to see that he might have fucked up somewhere along the line – before any of this, even before Recouvrance. He doesn't know what to say.

Castiel turns.

Some yards behind him, Dean is stood still with his hands in his pockets. Castiel knows he needs to look at Dean, but he can't drag his eyes higher than Dean's boots.

“Dick move, right,” Dean says. He still has that bored, pissed-off tone to his voice, but it is different somehow, now. He is quieter. The square is quiet, empty aside from a handful of soldiers coming out an apartment block down the far end, but Castiel can barely hear him across the space between them.

Castiel opens his mouth. “I was only going to say--”

“Doesn't really matter what you were gonna say,” Dean interrupts. “Because I never gave you a chance. Did I?”

Castiel knows he needs to look at Dean, but he can't drag his eyes higher than Dean's boots. There is something hot and choking at the base of Castiel's throat. In his head, he runs automatically through the apology he had planned for last night – all remorseful of his immaturity and lack of professionalism, his irrational jealousy – and realises how thoroughly he has missed the point.

“Hell. Guess I'm just an asshole like that,” Dean says bluntly.

Castiel shifts his weight from one foot to the other, and casts his gaze off somewhere past Dean. “I'm--” he starts. He swallows. “I'm not good at this.”

Dean gives a laugh that is bitter and far too loud. “Yeah, no shit, sir.”

Castiel is hyper-aware of noise from the next street over, of chatter slowly starting up in a building on the other side of the road, as gradually people wake up and get ready to move. With a feeling as though he stepping onto thin ice, he moves slowly back towards Dean. “I don't know what I'm doing,” he says, without looking at him, and the truth of it curls cold fingers under his ribs and digs in tight, anxiety tightening in his stomach. He reaches up to pass a hand over the back of his head. He hasn't rehearsed this. “I don't know how to – talk. Or deal with things. I don't know how to react, to anything, if not with anger. If I'm – and so often, I am – I don't know.”

None of this is coming out the way it's supposed to. Castiel is agonisingly conscious of soldiers walking past, of two officers arguing

at the far end of the square. Two scout cars come pulling in, the men inside them calling out loudly for someone whose name Castiel doesn't recognise. He wants with everything in him to check his watch, because he knows that he needs to be getting his company organised, but he can't walk away from this. His eyes dart nervously, and he tries to keep breathing.

“Look, I don't have time to talk to you about this now,” Castiel says, cutting himself off. Dean makes this sound, like he thought as much, like he should have expected this conversation to be cut short, but Castiel hardly knows what else he could have predicted, starting something like this on the morning they're due to move back into real combat for the first time since Brest. “But – I'd like to. Later. If I may.”

Dean scoffs. “You want to talk to me,” he says, dead-pan. “About your feelings.”

Castiel might as well be honest now. He takes a deep breath, and with an effort, he forces himself to look up and meet Dean's eyes. Beneath the bruising, Dean is angry, but there is something in the set of his mouth, the line of his brow, that is just tired. Castiel says, “No. I don't. But I owe you that much.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “You don't owe me anything.”

“Maybe not. But I think I need to.”

Dean looks at him, his face unreadable. He is quiet for several long moments, and then, his voice calm, he just says, “And what about what I need?”

Castiel blinks, bewildered. “What do you need?”

Dean shrugs. “Don't know. Not sure I need anything.” He pushes his hands into the pockets of his combat pants, and he looks away, over his shoulder. “Just wondering whether you'd even thought about it, is all.”

Castiel stares at him. His mouth is open, and he doesn't know what to say. All he had thought about was getting his chance to apologise. He had never considered that Dean might not even want to hear it.

Dean lets out a short breath, and he looks back at Castiel. “I thought you said you had to be somewhere,” he says pointedly. “Big hurry. You couldn't possibly talk. You don't have time.”

It's true: the square is almost busy now with people moving back and forth, and Castiel can hear the rumbling of more scout cars and trucks on the street at the end of the square, and there is someone yelling for their NCOs. Castiel can see Sergeant Milligan coming up with half of one-platoon, stooped over with equipment on their backs, ready to move.

“Dean,” Castiel manages.

“It's fine,” Dean says. He raises his eyebrows. “We'll talk about it later, right?” The way he says it is barbed, and Castiel knows he has said that before. *Not right now, we'll talk later*. Dodge and run. He wonders how many times he has done that to Dean. He thinks that it probably says something that he can't even remember.

“If you'll let me,” Castiel says. “Yes.”

Dean jerks his head over in the direction of the centre of the square,

where men are beginning to form up loosely on parade. “Then go.”

Castiel takes a tentative step backwards away from him, as though fearful that Dean will change his mind as soon as he looks away, but Dean only watches him with disinterest, until at last Castiel pulls himself together. He turns, and he walks away to find First Sergeant Masters, ready to organise the men. He can speak to Dean later; he will have all the time in the world.

9th October, 1944

Somehow, Castiel had forgotten what it was like. As soon as the shells start coming down, he remembers.

“Clear the streets,” he yells, pushing off the concrete wall at his back as his men down the line yell for cover, for a medic, for orders. “Get into some cover – now!”

The first shell punches a hole the size of an automobile in the wall of the apartment block opposite, belching forwards a column of thick dark smoke that rains brick and rubble over the whole street. The second shell comes closer. It slams into the sidewalk, completely gutting a small store along the roadside with a spray of glass, and Castiel feels the impact up through his knees.

He presses the side of his rifle tight against his waist, runs faster, and he veers sideways into an alleyway where he's out of their sightlines, and he presses his back against the wall. Along the wall beside are a handful of men from two-platoon, dirt-smeared and gasping.

“Lieutenant,” Corporal Doe says, from the front of the line. “What are your orders?”

They shouldn't be asking him this. “Where's Lieutenant Shurley?”

“Not sure, sir – lost comms,” Private Calahee says anxiously. “What should we do?”

Jesus Christ. This day just gets better and better. Castiel takes a deep breath. “Calahee, Turner, Concino, move up to that wall and lay down suppressive fire from there – Doe, you take them around, see if there's a way through. I'll cover you. Bass?” Castiel twists to look back over his shoulder at his radioman. “Get onto four-platoon, tell them to move up to the lines of the MSR past the church. And see if you can find out where Shurley and the rest of two-platoon is.” He turns again, to find Corporal Doe still crouched behind him. “What the fuck are you waiting for? Go!”

Doe gets to his feet and orders the men beside him up and ready. Castiel snaps the safety off his rifle, angles himself against the corner, all crumbling brickwork and concrete, and he twists fast – brings his rifle up into his shoulder – and he fires. Two shots. Three. Concino and the rest of second-squad move out fast, scrambling through the debris to clear the street to their next positions, and Castiel exhales slow along the cheekguard of his rifle, and he fires until his clip snaps off.

He pulls back, yanking his rifle up close to his chest, and he fumbles with the first pouch of his webbing for another clip. He struggles with the clip, and then he gets his hand inside – and his fingers scrape fabric, and nothing else. Castiel stalls. He stares blankly ahead, trying to think what to do, and it is a moment before he shakes himself back to reality. He got through Omaha without a rifle at all; he can get through this without ammunition.

Castiel swings his rifle over his shoulder, ducking his head under the strap, and he pauses to do up his webbing pouch – *first it's a pouch, it's*

a patch, then it's a submarine hatch – and he runs a hand over the top of his helmet before he sets off running again.

They're going back the way they came, squad by squad, but it's not a retreat. Castiel refuses to think of it as such. They just need to find another way in.

Half of two-platoon swing wide, skirting the enemy 88s' arcs of fire as they sweep through a block of mostly decimated houses to reach the intersection; word comes in on the radio from three-platoon that they are held up by a gunner position on their left axis of assault, tucked in somewhere between a hotel and an apartment block that Castiel can see faintly smoking on the horizon from the intial artillery battery. Four-platoon made one short push successfully and are now pinned down on two sides, firing near-incessantly to keep the Krauts' heads down and give one-platoon to meet them to clear the position. There's still no word on Lieutenant Shurley and the rest of two-platoon.

Castiel ducks and weaves, clearing heaps of rubble in long strides as he runs, and he is surveying distractedly as he goes – looking where he's going, looking for his men, looking for the tell-tale glint and flash of enemy positions up ahead while he's out in the open, looking for the pointed fork of an S-mine protruding from the ground. He nearly trips once, and then there is a deafening chatter of gunfire that opens up on him. He runs, throws himself hard into the shade of a crumbling wall. His bad shoulder bounces off concrete, and he stifles his grunt, and then he is half-crawling, half-shuffling forwards in a crouch, to reach a point where he can pop his head up and look out.

There, at last, is first-squad – on the far side of the road, distributed amongst the rubble, kneeling and prone, tucked partially into the wreckage of a line of abandoned stores.

Castiel pauses a moment for breath, his ears filled with the sound of bullets hammering off brick all around him, and absently, he thinks it the strangest thing, that he is calm now. He's been running on fumes

for weeks now, and here, for the first time since Brest, he is awake. His hands are steady.

Then, just when Castiel is beginning to think it might be under control: a dull, faraway noise, not so much like whistling as it is like the distant sound of a locomotive through a tunnel. A noise that trembles louder, closer, under it fills every part of Castiel's body, shaking through his bones, and he doesn't even have time to calculate how it is that the Eschweiler railway gun can reach them from here, because it's happening.

“Take cover,” he yells, and his voice is swallowed by the sound of the shell hitting.

The impact nearly takes his legs out from under him, the earth jarring violently beneath his feet, and he throws an arm up in front of his face. He runs, head ducked low, as distant guns boom and spit metal. He pushes himself faster, making for where first-squad is frantically scattering, and the air is rent with a hollow sound that grows to a vibrating, angry thing that shakes through the foundations of the buildings around them.

Castiel reaches Corporal Mills first, grabs a handful of his jacket and hauls him bodily upright – shouting, “Clear the street, go, go,” until his voice cracks – and the next shell smashes through the upper storeys of the building Castiel has just come from with a sound that briefly deafens him. The world is ringing, high-pitched and wavering, while windows implode and debris comes raining down in chunks the size of Castiel's head. “Keep moving,” Castiel calls out, following the men of two-platoon as they sprint for cover, and then there is a hissing ricochet of shrapnel rain and Calahee goes down.

“Calahee,” Castiel says urgently, and he grabs hold of his collar, ready to haul him up into a fireman's lift and get him out of there, but Calahee flops under his ministrations. His eyes are glassy, staring; his head lolls over to one side. There is a dark hole the size of a coin just

under his left ear. Castiel lets out his breath. “Shit.” He drops him back to the floor, and half-turns to move away before he changes his mind. He comes back, and rummages through Calahee's webbing until he comes up with the ammunition clips for his M1. Calahee isn't going to need it.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Bass is back at Castiel's shoulder. “Sir, I've got Baker-three-one on the line here--”

The air is still thundering. Castiel moves with Bass for cover, keeping low, and they tuck close into a doorway together to keep out of the street. Castiel takes the mouthpiece, tucking it tight into his shoulder to keep his hands free to snap the new clip onto his rifle. “Come in, this is Baker-six-nan – what is your status? Over.”

Hester's voice comes crackling through. “Baker-six, this is Baker-three-one – we are pinned down at the intersection by two enemy positions. Baker-four unable to break through, Baker-three unable to effectively engage – requesting--”

There is the echoing scream of a shell coming over, and Castiel ducks his head down, pulling his rifle in close against his chest. It is followed by a peppering of mortars from the enemy 88s, their low whistle and bang like firecrackers by comparison.

“--repeat, that is negative on artillery support, but we need extra firepower on clearing this position--” Hester goes on, and starts reeling off coordinates.

Castiel digs in his combat jacket for his map case, keeping his eyes out for danger from all sides even as he runs over the coordinates in his head so as not to forget – oh niner seven three, five five oh two. He finds it easily on the map, tucked between the church and the square. “Baker-three-one, come in, this is the six – I'm diverting Baker-two-one

to your position for fire support while you engage, how do you copy?"

"Copy that, sir."

There is a low whistle building – a cry of *incoming* – and then a shell shatters the nearby road surface, kicking up a storm of stone and loose concrete. Castiel presses himself back against the wall, scrunching his face up against the cloud of thick grey dust. In the near distance, gunfire rattles on and on.

"ETA ten minutes max," Castiel says into the mouthpiece. "Hold your position."

"Roger that."

Castiel hesitates. He doesn't need to give Hester more reason to doubt him, but damn it, it's important. He can't let it slide that Lieutenant Shurley and part of two-platoon have just disappeared. "And have you had any word from Baker-two-six?"

"Negative."

Fuck. Castiel grimaces. "Copy that. Six out." He hands the mouthpiece back, and Bass adjusts the radio on his back.

They move together, fast through the darkly coiling smoke along the proven route. Second-squad flank right, pushing through hollowed-out buildings that rattle and groan at the foundations. They split along the middle, taking staggered file through alleys, curving into a long line to cross the square. The ground moves with faint tremors beneath Castiel's feet as he runs, rifle close to his body. They run and run,

clearing through houses, tossing grenades through open windows; they kick down doors and sweep through fast, rifles pulled up tight into shoulders to squeeze off a clean shot into anything that moves. They press forwards, moving almost as one, a finely-oiled machine.

The next road on the right takes them towards the intersection, and second-squad follow the route through rubble and metal to find three-platoon strewn all across. Up ahead, there is the dull thud of an 88 being fired, followed by a rattle of machine-gun fire. Up ahead, there is Hester's voice shouting itself raw. Castiel slows.

He raises a hand to indicate for second-squad to stop, and he calls back over his shoulder. “Mills, take Armstrong and Turner up along the wall; Doe and Bearcey follow ready for covering fire; everyone else with me.”

Mills heads off first, keeping close to the brickwork as he runs with the others on his tail, and then Castiel moves up. They jog, then push themselves faster, and by the time they break out onto the intersection, where the air is thick with firepower as it cracks and booms. He looks out quickly as he goes – one fire-team behind the truck; one fire-team distinguished by rifle muzzles jutting from a nearby window; sharpshooters tucked amongst the rubble; Lieutenant Hester's panicked voice somewhere towards the left fork of the intersection – and he directs the few men of three-platoon that he has with him to their positions.

Castiel pushes himself into a sprint towards Hester, and comes skidding to his side, nearly crashing into the wall which Hester takes cover behind.

“What are we up against?” Castiel says.

“At least two 88s quarter-left of axis, plus an MPG position – unclear

how many gunners, but I'd say two, three, plus riflemen. Far right of axis, towards the back of that park there – you see it? We've got suppressive fire, I'm thinking just riflemen, but there's a couple of sharpshooters and we can't get anywhere." Hester lets out a sharp breath. "Alistair and four are down the other side of the intersection, that way, but they can't break through to give us any real supprot because coming up that way, they're right in the sight-lines of that second position, and they can't turn back to flank around because of that fucking railway gun."

Castiel exhales slowly through his teeth. "Copy that," he says slowly, his eyes tracking the two positions. There is the muzzle-flash of the second position; he can calculate the trajectory of the first from the way the mortars are coming down. There are the men spread out – there is Halliday flat on his belly with the butt of his Thompson pulled into his shoulder, tripod set up unevenly on the rough ground, and there is Sergeant Etheridge on one side of a fire-blackened truck to fire over the bonnet, and there is Winchester. He has his hands balled tight around the top of his musette bag, and every line in his body is tense. There is a spray of blood all across his jaw. His hands are darkly stained.

"What are your orders, sir?" Hester says, and Castiel can hear the way that he says *sir* to be condescending, his voice sour. Castiel doesn't give a shit about Hester's pride – getting pinned down and unable to move, having to call for help – he ignores it.

"Smoke," Castiel says. "Get smoke down there, there--" he points, "and there, past the corner. They'll be expecting an offensive, so they'll open fire – we move your third squad and two-one up as though moving to engage the second enemy position, with your first and squad laying down suppressive fire to cover them, but switch fire left. They're most vulnerable through that middle building, so if they respond the way they should, they'll move to cover it, and that should give four-platoon time to break through." He looks over to see if Hester is following him, and is distracted when he notices the frown on Hester's face, his mouth twisting. "What?"

“Nothing,” Hester says, and he looks away. “Just. It's a good plan.”

Castiel narrows his eyes. “I'm glad it has your approval,” he says coldly. “Now – are you good to execute?”

Hester bristles. “I'm ready.”

Castiel signals Bass over and gets him to radio it in to Alistair, tells them to be ready to move as soon as the smoke is up and they've switched fire left. Then he and Hester move, each taking two squads under their control. Castiel takes third-squad and the leftover men from the fractured mess of two-platoon, and he recounts their instructions, tells them the signal, spreads them out to wait.

Clenching a smoke grenade in one hand, Sergeant Etheridge shifts impatiently from one foot to the other. Beside him, Donald Hanscum plays anxiously with the sleeves of his combat jacket. Castiel breathes, and he watches movement at the far side of the intersection. They can only try this once.

Everything has gone quiet and still, no-one firing from either side. It makes the air feel even heavier, brick dust and silence, and Castiel flexes his hand on his rifle. He glances over at his squad-leaders. “On my signal,” he says. He snaps the safety catch off his M1, and he tightens his grip on the wood. He takes a deep breath, and then he pulls his rifle up into his shoulder, and he stands, and he starts firing.

For a split-second, fear seizes in Castiel's chest as he thinks, *fuck, they're not doing it, they're not following the plan,* and he fires, and he fires again, and he is waiting to get shot, and then white phosphorus explodes hotly all at once, in front of him and all down the line.

There is shouting in German as pale smoke begins to bloom up from

the ground, and as the thunder of machine-gun fire starts up afresh, the rest of the line are getting to their feet. Castiel fires, rifle punching back against his shoulder with every round, and ahead of them there is the dull kick of a mortar being set off. “Move,” Castiel yells, and he fires again. He has three rounds left. He snaps the safety on, tosses his rifle around the back of his shoulder on its sling, and he leads the way forwards through the billowing smoke.

Castiel is half-aware, as he runs forwards, of Dean at his three o'clock. He doesn't look over.

Back on the other side of the intersection, gunfire rings out loud and fast to try and keep the Germans' heads down, and Castiel pushes himself faster as the 88s thud and thud, and mortars whistle shrilly overhead to crash down and lit the ground around them with fire. They run hard, barely slowly when they reach the far wall beside where the strip of barren parkland where the second position is set up beyond a chainlink fence, and then in the next chatter of machine-gun fire, Halliday is caught in the open. He spasms where he is stood as the metal rips through him – shoulder, stomach, arm, collarbone – and then he collapses like a house of cards, folding in on himself.

“Contact right!” Etheridge screams. “Man down!”

Behind Castiel, Hanscum's voice picks up the call for a medic before Castiel can open his mouth, and Winchester comes running past, ready to dive out into the open, where bullets slice sharp and loud through the air to dig dull holes in the brickwork.

Castiel doesn't think; instinctively, he grabs Dean by the clothing, hauls him back against the wall beside Castiel, and holds him still. “Wait,” he snaps, even as Dean jerks against his grip, indignant. He doesn't let him go. He says it again: “Wait.”

Dean meets his eyes with a look somewhere between disbelief and anger, his mouth a tight line, but he doesn't try to get away. His hand stays tightly clenched on his medical equipment, and he throws his head to look back out at where Halliday is struggling on the ground, blood pooling dark and sticky around him.

Castiel lets Dean go long enough to fish a grenade from his belt. “Hanscum and Winchester – retrieval,” he yells, and he rocks up onto the balls of his feet where he crouches, ready to move. “Etheridge, Roth, providing suppressive fire!” He pulls the pin, releases the spoon. He rolls the grenade in his hand – one thousand – his palm is sweaty – two thousand – and then he stands, and he pulls his arm back, and he throws.

Beyond the fence, gunfire starts up again, rattling hard and angry in Castiel's direction, and he ducks down, yanks his rifle around from his shoulder – there is a loud bang – and Dean goes sprinting out. He gets onto his knees amongst the rubble, hands flying to tilt two fingers to Halliday's pulse point, to grab arm and thigh to lift him up and get him to safety even before Hanscum gets there to help him. At his six, Castiel stands up with his rifle in his shoulder to cover him, and he fires into the smoke and falling leaves.

11th October, 1944

For the first time all day, the battalion is silent and still.

The last few days have been a hard push up through Herzogenrath, and the railway gun up past Eschweiler has been haunting the 29th Infantry all along the line, with no sign of anyone getting near enough to do anything about it for some time yet. They've mostly cleared through the area surrounding Alsdorf , but there are still a few strongholds within the town, and not enough intelligence to try and clear them tonight, so the 116th have pulled back to regroup while recon tries to get some real information on what's waiting for them tomorrow.

Standing on the roadside curb, Castiel stifles a yawn and rubs at his eyes with one hand. He has a cigarette smouldering low, half-forgotten, between two knuckles. It's somewhere near oh-two-hundred.

He counts the hours sometimes, but for now he's lost track. He has a vague recollection of drifting off on the back of a scout car, of losing part of a converastion with Alistair, but he hasn't been horizontal in days. He doesn't think so, at least, but it's hard to be sure. It's harder still to care: he has more important things to worry about.

There is the number of reports Castiel has to write up from the company's last few actions; there is Lieutenant Shurley's disconcerting habit of running off with his platoon half-cocked and leaving his radio behind; there is the scrap of paper scrawled with *Lieutenant Wallace* heavy in Castiel's pocket; there is the lull of a quiet night feeling less like peace, more like the lull before a storm, Castiel constantly tensed for the next shell to strike. There is Dean.

Castiel lets his breath out.

He lifts his cigarette halfway to his lips, but doesn't quite get there. His hand hovers distractedly, and his eyes trace a slow course over the street, the shattered windows with shadows moving within, the shifting wedge of people at the far end of the road, all darkness. Light discipline is strict tonight, as close as they are to enemy lines. In the far distance, there is the faint glowing light of a flare, fizzing just short of the moon.

Castiel's cigarette reaches his mouth at last, and he inhales to find only the dull, sour taste of paper. He lowers the butt, glancing briefly at the end where it's gone out, and then flicks it away.

North of their position, the off-rhythm tapping of faraway gunfire starts up again, followed shortly by a muffled *thump-thump – thump-thump* as mortars find their targets. Castiel looks back over his shoulder, towards the first of the many buildings where the men of 2nd Battalion are billeted.

Fox Company is out on patrol, somewhere between here and Neuweiler; Able is on sentry at the north-western point of the 116th's temporary billeting. Meanwhile, Baker is tucked away asleep, stationed in abandoned apartments and hollowed-out houses to get some some rest in before they have to move out again. Dean is in one of those buildings – not billeted with the others yet, since earlier today they found medical surplus that needed sorting through. It would be the easiest thing in the world to go find him.

Castiel checks his watch. Oh-two-thirteen.

He lowers his hand, his fingers curled into a nervous fist. Distractedly, with a mouth that is sour already with tobacco and smoke, he thinks he could do with a smoke.

Machine-gun chatter starts up beyond their position, a rising and falling sound. Castiel forces himself to make a decision, and he turns to head down the street towards 2nd Battalion.

He remembers the building – a tall, narrow one with concrete steps leading up to the front door. It's split into apartments; the medics are upstairs. Castiel goes in.

He climbs the stairs slowly, and he trails his hand along the banister, his fingertips bumping over unevenness in the wood grain. At the top of the steps is a narrow, slightly crooked hallway that bears off to the right, where there is a step, and three doors. Through the first door is a neglected, dark front room.

There is a wide window facing north that picks up just enough of the flares and firepower from the front line that thin red light picks out the lines of furniture, of medical detritus stacked in a heap by the wall to be sorted, of Dean's turned back. He sits by the window – on a chair or a crate, Castiel can't tell – with his shoulders pulled up tense. His hands wind slowly over and over each other, twisting gauze bandaging back into its roll.

Castiel pauses in the doorway. He pushes his hands into the pockets of his combats, and he clears his throat.

“Evening,” Dean says, but his usual cocky nonchalance is somewhat stilted. He doesn't look over.

Castiel shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “Where are the others?”

“Next door. Told 'em to get some shut-eye while I finished up sorting the supplies,” Dean says. He keeps winding.

In the pocket of his pants, Castiel's fingers find the cold touch of his crucifix. Next door. It doesn't seem far enough away. These walls are probably thin. If one of them is awake in there, then-- Castiel shuts that thought down. He doesn't know when he's going to get a better chance than this. He and Dean have been avoiding each other for too long now, and it's not just Castiel's peace of mind that suffers for it: company cohesion suffers when he and Dean are anything less than a team. They need this resolved.

Castiel steels himself. “Is now a good time to talk?” he asks stiffly.

Dean looks up, then. He considers Castiel for a moment, silently. He makes Castiel feel small. “Sure,” he says, turning the roll of gauze slowly over in his hands.

Castiel moves into the room. Beneath his feet, the floorboards squeal and groan before settling. He takes a deep breath for courage – and then he realises that he doesn't know where to begin. He hesitates, mouth half-open. He thinks the words *I'm sorry* are probably a good place to start, but even saying it inside his head makes something cold and fearful curl in his gut. He swallows.

Dean looks away. He goes on winding the bandages around and around, rolling neatly, his hands moving in slow arcs just about distinguishable in the low, reddish light from the window.

I'm sorry, he rehearses silently. He breathes, and he opens his mouth. *I'm sorry.* It catches in his throat, stuck like a swelling, and for a moment he almost chokes on it. He swallows again. *I'm sorry.*

Dean lets out a short laugh. “Well, shit, sir,” he says, and Castiel can see the outline of him, the way he shakes his head and looks down at his hands. “This is probably the quietest talk I've ever ha--”

“He was jealous of you,” Castiel says quietly.

Dean's hands become still.

It isn't what Castiel meant to say. He half wants to take it back, half to walk from the room without another word.

For a long time, there is only silence between them, and Dean doesn't

move. Castiel stands a few foot from him in the dark, looking out through the window at a road that is too quiet.

At last, Dean speaks. “You mean--”

“No,” Castiel says, as he realises what Dean is thinking – the same thing Castiel thought, when he first heard it. “Not like – no. He--” Castiel breaks off. He drops his eyes. “He resented the time I spent with you. He worried that if, for whatever reason, there would be a time where I would have to choose, you or him, I would put you first.”

Dean stares at him. It's hard to see his face in the dark, but when he says, “That's ridiculous,” his voice is disbelieving.

Castiel cants his head over to one side. In a way it's almost endearing, that Dean continues to have such faith in him in spite of everything. “That's what I said,” he says, and he doesn't look at Dean. “That it was ridiculous, and I would always put him first, and if I had to choose, I would choose him everytime, and – it wasn't true.”

Castiel exhales. There it is, out in the open between them now, where Castiel can't take it back.

Dean has gone very quiet. Castiel can't even hear him breathing. The only sound is the chatter of gunfire in the distance, the mortars and smoke that light the sky through the window up pink and hazy along the horizon. Dean is a silhouette against the skyline.

“I chose you,” Castiel says flatly. He is getting good at talking about things as though they don't matter, now. He keeps breathing, in and out, and he stares at the bleeding red of the horizon until his eyes ache. “And then I lost him. And while, rationally, I know that those

two facts are completely without correlation--" He inhales, long and slow. "It doesn't feel like that. It feels like cause and effect."

After a long pause, Dean says, "I didn't know." His voice is low. In his peripheral vision, Castiel sees Dean lower his handful of rolled gauze to his lap. "That you would put me first."

Castiel looks down. "Well, you were never supposed to know," he mutters, and he rummages in his pocket for his cigarette tin – not necessarily because he needs a smoke, although he does, but because he has to do something with his hands. He has been stood still for too long, and his eyes are heavy, his shoulder-blades sore for want of sleep.

"Why not?"

Castiel stalls. He glances up at Dean, and then away again, to the cigarette tin he has pulled from his jacket. He doesn't answer the question. He doesn't even know what he would say. All that he can think of is that moment when Dean, with care and with Joe Harvelle's scissors, had brushed his hand gently backwards through Castiel's hair, and everything in Castiel had drawn towards Dean like a willow to the water.

He opens his cigarette tin to find that he's out. He's been smoking so much these last few days that there's only his sentimental half-smoke left, and for a second, he is so tired and worn-down that he considers taking it. He doesn't know if he'll ever get home anyway. He might as well.

He shuts the tin with a sharp, loud snap.

"I'm sorry," Castiel says, still not looking at Dean, and he takes a deep

breath. “And – please don't think I'm trying to justify my actions, or make excuses for myself. I just wanted you to understand.” His hands are unsteady; he pushes them, with his tin, into the pockets of his pants. “I never actually believed that it was your fault, Dean. It was just easier than accepting it was my own.”

For a moment, Dean is silent. Then, his voice so soft as to be almost inaudible, he just says, “Fuck,” and he looks away.

Castiel lifts his head. “What?”

Dean lets out all of his breath, slow, like he's deflating. He stares out the window. “You were in love with him, right?”

Castiel is so startled by the question – by why that, of all things, would be the first thing Dean takes from this conversation; by why Dean would think that at all; by why it would even matter – that it takes him a beat to answer. “No,” he says, at last, and he can hear that his hesitation sounds like uncertainty.

Dean doesn't say anything. Castiel knows he doesn't believe it.

“No,” he says again, more firmly now. “I wasn't.”

Even as it kicks off a fresh ache in his gut, so fierce it pitches somewhere close to nausea and his throat closes up, he sees the last ten years as on a flickering film reel. The dances in the town hall, Castiel awkwardly off to one side as Inias spoke to blushing girls in ironed jumpers; Castiel coming into school to hear the news of Inias' latest Saturday night courtship; the way they'd sit on the porch steps on long summer nights and talk near-endlessly, with Castiel all the while sick and cursing that he couldn't be normal. By basic training, five years ago, it was less like a bruise, more like a long-healed break

in the bone, once in a while twinging dully.

“Maybe once – a long time ago, but...” Castiel trails off. “I don't know.” He looks down at his feet. “Truthfully, I'm not even sure what that feels like.”

Dean inhales. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Castiel repeats, a frown pulling down between his eyebrows.

"Yeah, okay,” Dean says. “Alright?” He rolls his head over, away from Castiel, and even in darkness, no more than shadows and outlines as he is, Castiel sees Dean drop his head into his chest. “Christ. What do you want me to say, Cas?”

Castiel thinks, *anything but that.* He doesn't say it out loud, though. He doesn't say anything. He has *Cas* ringing in his head like the deafened split-second after a bomb has dropped.

Dean says, “I mean, I get it. Alright, I do – it just...” Dean trails off, and Castiel knows what he wants to say, even if he doesn't want it out loud in the air between them.

“It doesn't change anything,” Castiel finishes for him, voice a little hollow.

Dean looks over, and the way he exhales, the way his shoulders sag, tells Castiel that he was right. “It changes some things,” he says, which is surprising. At least he doesn't sound angry anymore. “But you know, that's not all of it. The way you've been acting, even before – before what happened--” he says carefully, his head moving as though

to dart a quick, unreadable glance at Castiel. As he speaks, there is a low whistle that underpins his words, something that raises the hair on the back of Castiel's neck, and for one moment he thinks, *how is Dean doing that?* and then he realises.

“Get away from the window,” he interrupts, and he snaps his head over to look at Dean, eyes wide. “Now! We h--”

There is no split-second of slow-motion; it happens quickly.

There is Dean with a fistful of the front of Castiel's jacket, and there is a moment where the world whites out sharp and hot. Castiel hits the floor hard, there is blinding pain that radiates out from his bad shoulder, and then he is on the floor with Dean heavy on top of him.

His ears are ringing. As his hearing comes back, fragmented and fuzzy, he can hear yelling from the street – *medic, we need a medic – everybody clear the streets, get into cover* – and there is banging in the distance. Castiel blinks, disoriented.

There is another deafening boom, further away now, but it still shakes the foundations of the building around them, loosening thick grey dust, and Castiel knows that they can't stay here.

“Dean,” he manages, and he shifts underneath Dean's weight. His hand comes up to find Dean's shoulder, and he is fighting down panic, because Dean has not yet moved since he shoved Castiel away from the window. “Dean--”

Slowly, with a loud groan, Dean moves. “Ow.”

“Dean,” Castiel says, letting his breath out in a rush. He's okay. They're okay. “Are you alright?”

“Just peachy, sir.” Dean pushes himself up on his hands, and Castiel helps him off.

Castiel scrambles to his feet, grabs his rifle off the floor, and slings it over his shoulder. At that moment, another shell hits, and the house vibrates around them. Castiel ducks instinctively, fear clenching in his gut at the thought that the whole building might come down, and somehow he finds that, without thinking, his hand is thrown out towards Dean: he doesn't have his helmet on. “We have to go – now.”

“Couldn't agree more, sir,” Dean says. He hurriedly grabs his musette bag and the roll of gauze that he dropped when the shell hit, and he slaps his helmet onto his head, chinstraps swinging. Together, they move.

They go down the stairs through the choking dust and out into the rubble. Castiel leads the way, turning the corner fast with his rifle pulled into his shoulder to check that the street is clear, and then he lifts a hand to signal to Dean that it's safe – or at least, as safe as a street can be when there are heavy artillery shells zeroed in on their position. It's been about forty seconds since the last shell hit. Dean sticks close, waiting for orders at his six. They move as though they pivot on the same point. Fifty seconds. The street is deadly quiet now. One minute.

“There are wounded you need to retrieve, but that's probably exactly what they're waiting for,” Castiel says, without looking back over his shoulder at Dean. He can feel the solid weight of Dean's shoulders against his own, back to back. “You help them, but if you so much as hear a breeze like there might be more incoming, you clear the street immediately. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go.”

Dean hesitates. He half-turns, and he has a hand half-reaching for Castiel, as though to hold him still and keep him here, but he doesn't close the distance. His hand hovers just short of Castiel's elbow, and he doesn't speak.

Castiel looks at him, and something tightens in his throat. Dean's face is all uncertainty. Castiel swallows. “Later,” he says. He means it. “Now go.”

Dean nods. He heads off at a run, and Castiel lowers his rifle as he heads in the opposite direction towards where the men were stationed. As the shockwaves of the last shelling settle, it starts up – yelling, someone crying for help, orders from left and right as NCOs try to collect their squads. Castiel finds two-platoon first, Sergeant Garrigan calling out for the men to stay in cover.

“Garrigan,” Castiel shouts across as he approaches at a jog. “Sit-rep?”

“Not sure yet – first squad is all accounted for and uninjured, but the rest of the platoon is scattered.”

“Where's Shurley?”

“Not sure, sir.”

Castiel lets out his breath in a short burst. Great. He turns back to Garrigan. “Get them numbered off and keep them in cover. The next shelling could be at any minute. Try to get Shurley on the radio, and I'll be back soon.”

“Roger that, sir.”

Castiel moves out further down the street, and then crosses the road fast, one hand on his helmet just in case. He bangs on the door of a small apartment block with blown-out windows and calls through, “Baker-one, this is the six – do you copy?”

There is a moment where nothing happens. Castiel can faintly hear scuffling behind the door, and then it opens. Kevin Tran stands there with blood sprayed across one side of his face. “Sir,” he says.

“Tran.” Castiel moves in past him. “What's going on?”

Inside, Morvey is on his back on a wooden dining table, gasping and clutching white-knuckled at Spangler's hand, as Corporal Harvelle pushes up his combat jacket to get at a series of thin red slashes that leak blood over his stomach and stain the waistband of his pants. He looks over and meets Castiel's eyes with a shaky smile. “Doing great, sir,” he grits out.

Private Tran turns to Castiel. “He caught shrapnel from the second shell through the belly – got dinged at least three times. It's hard to tell how bad it is.”

Castiel nods. It's hard to tear his eyes away from the erratic pulse of blood out of the wounds, even as Harvelle wipes it away again and again with a darkly-stained rag, tries to apply pressure. “Any other casualties?” he asks.

“Corporal Sorento got a little in the shoulder, but he's doing fine, and, uh – Spangler hit his head on a table when he was taking cover,” Tran says, straight-faced.

“Alright. Where's Virgil?”

“Here.” Lieutenant Virgil comes through from the next room with dust in his hair and a scratch in his voice from inhaling smoke. “One-platoon all present. What are your orders?”

“Stay here until the whole company is accounted for, and stay in cover – I don't want any more casualties.”

Virgl nods. “Copy that.”

Outside, the air is rent with the scream of another shell coming over, and Castiel drops to one knee, tucks himself in tight against the wall beside a heavy cabinet. He braces a hand over his head, and he watches through the open door as the shell slams into the second storey of the building across the street, how it decimates the upper two levels – and then there is no more time for watching anything, because the sky is raining concrete rubble chunks the size of Castiel's head and thick grey dust is sweeping fast towards them.

He takes a deep breath, tucks his face into his elbow to breathe in the musty, damp mould scent of his combats rather than the smoke, and he waits for the barrage to end.

12th October, 1944

Open fields, clear visibility of at least a mile for artillery to the south. Houses positioned to curl inwards around the town centre, little visibilty out of the centre to see enemy coming up to flank them. Houses upon houses. Castiel remembers giving the order to clear every building, but he was caught up in a battalion briefing with the other Company COs, and so he can't be sure that his men were thorough. He trusts them – of course he does – but everyone is tired. It would be the easiest thing in the world for someone in hiding to slip past one of his men. They could wait until Schleibach was deemed safe, and then set up a gunner position at one of these windows. Any of these windows. Or all of them. Castiel's eyes move the length of the street, focusing on every window individually for the metallic glint of a muzzle, of a MPG tripod, of the long barrel of a sniper rifle. He is just being careful.

“--ak? Jesus. Novak!”

Castiel jumps, and he jerks back two steps and his hand goes to his rifle, but before he can pull it up into his shoulder and engage, he sees Gabriel. He lets out his breath. “Captain,” he says. He takes his hand from his rifle, lets it fall back in its sling. “My apologies. I was just--”

“It's alright,” Gabriel says, which is a small mercy, because Castiel has no idea how he was going to finish that sentence. He knows what he was doing, but he'll sound crazy out loud. Gabriel rolls his shoulders back, tips his head over to one side to crack his neck. “Jeez Louise, listen to me. I sound like an old person. How are you holding up?”

“Fine,” Castiel says.

“Really? And Aachen, you're just..." Gabriel trails off expectantly.

There is a beat. “Fine,” Castiel says again.

“Right. Yeah.” Gabriel looks over his shoulder, down the street. “Me too.” He takes a deep breath, and looks back to Castiel with a winning smile. “Still. Least heavily defended way in, right? You know what they say about clouds and silver linings. Should be a piece of cake.”

“Of course,” Castiel says. Even though they are friends, he is conscious of Gabriel's rank, and so he doesn't mention their ever-increasing proximity to the Eschweiler railway gun, or that their way in – a suburb called Wurselen – is an island between them and Aachen, one that should be flanked and surrounded, rather than diving straight in at the narrowest point. Instead he asks, “How are your replacements faring?”

“Oh, fantastic, yeah. Got more E-1s than I know what to do with, but I guess it's better than a kick in the teeth, so.”

Castiel knows that feeling. “I lost four yesterday,” he says, off-hand.

“Four?” Gabriel repeats incredulously. “Fuck. What the hell were they doing?”

Castiel gives a loose shrug. “Three thought they could take a gunner position on their own. The other was just bad luck.”

Gabriel rocks back on his heels. “Sorry to hear it, pal.”

Something flickers in Castiel's peripheral vision, and he half-turns his head to follow it, but it's already gone. “At least it taught the others to be more careful,” he says, and he hates that he thinks like this now. Four men dead, and needing letters home, but at least their deaths can teach the rest of the replacements a lesson they should have learned in basic training. If they even went to basic training, that is. Castiel remembers that he still needs to write those letters, and he fishes in

the back pouch of his webbing for the slip of paper where scribbled the names.

“That's true,” Gabriel says.

Castiel unfolds the slip of paper. Renouf, Sadler, Kowalewksi, Beale. There is a fifth name that he does not look at.

Gabriel tilts his head at the paper unfurled between Castiel's hands. “Those the unlucky bastards?”

“Yes.” Castiel folds the paper away, and he tries not to let the overwhelming sense of defeat sink into the set of his shoulders. He holds himself straight. “I need to write the letters, still.”

Gabriel grimaces. “So you've got a great evening ahead of you, huh? Well, shit, I'm sorry to have disturbed you. Just wanted to check you were okay." He shakes back his sleeve to check his watch, before swearing under his breath. “Shitting useless fucker. Stopped working again.” He lifts his eyes to Castiel. “I'll see you at the briefing before we move out?”

“See you then,” Castiel says, and he lets Gabriel wander away, cursing to himself as he goes.

Castiel is conscious, now, of the time: twenty-three-hundred-thirty-six. Less five hours until they're pushing into Wurselen, until all along the front-line, the 29th and 30th Infantry begin the assault into Aachen. He stretches one hand until his joints pop, curls into tightly into a fist so that his fingernails bite into the meat of his palm. The slight sting of it grounds him.

He moves down the street, keenly aware of the open windows and doors, of the expanse of farmland between here and Wurselen over which any German man with a scope could be peering, of the faint drone of aeroplanes in the distance which are probably British Air Force, but could just as easily be Luftwaffe. As he walks, he catches sight of the dull red glow of a smouldering fire tucked away against a building, around which Pazhayattil, Armstrong, and Ziskie are huddled, warming their hands. Replacements again – green young men barely out of high school who don't know any better. Castiel makes straight for them.

“Light discipline,” he calls out as he approaches, and they lift their heads, startled and shame-faced. “Put that out now!”

“Sorry, sir,” they mumble, and Ziskie hurries to stamp out the embers.

“If I can see it from the other end of the street, they can see it through binoculars,” Castiel says sharply. “You'll make yourselves very unpopular if you get us all killed.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Don't let me see you doing that again,” Castiel tells them, voice hard. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Pazhayattil seems hesitant, and he stands up, dusting his hands off on his pants. “Uh, sir. Sorry to bother you, but I just – do you know when we might get supplied with cold weather gear?”

Castiel's mouth presses into a thin line. He hasn't even heard Battalion mention it. The S-1 has been entirely preoccupied with ammunition, rations, medical supplies; it's as though they haven't even thought of it. In mid-October, it's not so cold yet as to need it during the daytime, but the nights are getting bitter, and they're not coming off the front-line anytime soon. But these men are red-faced with cold, making fires under orders of light discipline, and as Castiel considers that they have been patrolling and fighting for up of fifteen hours, he realises that his own fingers are cramped with cold. He hadn't noticed. “Soon,” he lies. “I'll let you know when I get word.”

“Thank you, sir.” Pazhayattil shifts awkwardly, glancing back over his shoulder at where their fire used to be. "Uh. You want a coffee or anything, sir?”

God, Castiel could do with some coffee. His eyes ache, he has a throbbing pain in the centre of his forehead, and it seems a Herculean effort just to keep standing upright. “No, thank you. Are you ready to move out at oh-four-hundred?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then get some rest,” Castiel tells them. “You'll need the energy tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.” They hurry to pack up their rations and mess tins, fumbling and clanking as they go, but Castiel supposes there's only so much he can do at any given moment to shape them into decent soldiers without overwhelming them. He'll let someone from their platoon tell them how to noise-proof their webbing.

Castiel turns his back on them and continues moving down the street. From the houses along the main road, he can hear the rest of the 2nd Battalion – Lieutenant Cain's dulcet tones floating out as he dresses

down one of his squad-leaders; Lieutenant Naomi frantically reinforcing the standards of combat dress to ensure overall company tidiness when they begin the assault; a handful of platoon-leaders from Charlie laughing themselves silly over something someone had said earlier. There is a scout car unloading crates of smoke grenades in red and white; a handful of men from Baker stand with their rifles pointed at a crumbling wall, idly practicing the motions of weapon presention for arms' inspection at top speed, in some kind of competition. So far, Max Miller seems to be winning.

“Good work,” Castiel says as he passes, and he slaps a distracted hand to Miller's shoulder. “Don't forget to get some sleep.”

Up by Company CP, there are men standing around in a loose circle, hands in pockets. First Sergeant Masters is recounting some gruesome combat injury story that has a few of the others wincing; Du Mort and Dean Winchester look unfazed. They've seen worse, Castiel supposes.

“--bone coming right out of the leg in two different places. They thought he was gonna bleed out before they got him to safety,” Masters is saying. “Last I heard he's doing fine, but he's not coming out of hospital anytime soon. That's a ticket back to England for sure.”

“And what, this was in Able?” Harvelle asks.

“Mm-hm.”

“Shit – and they were clearing Ofden with us, so that must have been, what, less than a mile away?” Bradbury says worriedly. “That could've been us, easy.”

“Yeah, well, it isn't exactly as though we've been coming through this scot-free either. The other companies were probably talking up what

happened to Andy Gallagher, same as we're talking up Evans right now." Johnny Mills shrugs. "It happens to everyone."

Bradbury is the first one to notice Castiel coming over. He lifts his hand in a wave. "Evening, sir," he says, and the others turn to follow his gaze.

Castiel isn't sure whether Bradbury sounds awkward speaking to him, or if he's imagining it. Castiel thinks of Dean telling Bradbury to play along with the bruises and swelling along his eye socket and jaw, and then he tries not to think about it. "Evening," he says, and he looks away from Bradbruy, towards the rest of them. "Everything alright?"

The jumbled response from eight men speaking at once comes back more or less positive – *doing fine, sir – can't complain – twisted my ankle, can you believe it? - not too bad, not bad at all* – and Castiel nods. He can deal with a twisted ankle and some grumbling.

"Glad to hear it," he says, even though he can hear that exhaustion makes his voice flat, disinterested. He can't find the energy to care. Past them, he sees a silver flash somewhere in a window on the corner, and his focus snaps onto it. He holds his breath. He waits, the order to get out of the street, take cover, bring forwards mortars and sharpshooters to take a sniper, centre-left of axis three-hundred metres the room above the baker's – and then he exhales, because there is a man from Charlie Company sorting through his webbing. Just some strange man, a U.S soldier, emptying his water bottle onto the street below. Castiel breathes, and he drags his attention back to the men in front of him. "Are you ready to move out?"

"As ready as we'll ever be, sir," Du Mort says with a smile.

"Ready to give 'em hell," Harvelle says confidently. "Wurselen won't know what hit it."

“Excellent.” Castiel looks across them, noting the dark circles under their eyes, the hard set to their mouths. They've been in combat over a hundred days now, and it shows. Johnny still has his injured shoulder; when Bradbury stands still, he favours one leg to keep the strain off the ass-cheek he got shrapnel in; Bass stands with his arm held close to his body since he took a round through the elbow. “You need to get some sleep. Do your rounds, check on your men, and then get yourselves squared away. Du Mort and Winchester, you run by platoon-leaders to follow up injuries and make sure that there aren't going to be any problems popping up tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Alright. I'll see you in the morning.”

They lift their heads in that silent almost-salute that some of the NCOs have adopted for the field, and then, jostling and talking nonsense still, they head off together back towards where they are billeted. All except one.

“How are you?” Dean asks, one hand in the pocket of his combats, the other twisting ash from the end of a low-burning cigarette.

Castiel lets out a heavy sigh. Why is it that Dean always refuses to do his damn job just when Castiel needs it from him the most? “I thought I told you to go and check on the men,” he says shortly.

“I am doing.” Dean pauses, and then repeats himself: “How are you?”

Castiel stops and looks up at Dean, who simply continues to stand a couple of feet from him, and even in the thin, pale light from a moon

that cuts through cloud cover, Castiel can pick out a look of raised-brow expectancy on his dirt-smeared face. The words that had originally bubbled up in Castiel's throat would have been cutting and rude, even deliberately cruel, but he stops short. He exhales sharply in an attempt to control his temper. "I'm fine."

"You look tired."

With a short laugh, Castiel shakes his head. Tired - who would have guessed. He doesn't know how to even begin to answer that. "I'm fine," he says again.

"Bullshit."

Castiel looks away. His temper is short and snapping, and he wants to tell Dean to fuck off. He breathes in, slowly, and he tries to make himself tell the truth. "I've--" he starts at last, voice low and more bitter than he planned. "I've not been sleeping well."

"Worried about taking Aachen?" Dean asks.

Castiel glances away into the darkness of the street, where men are traipsing into buildings for sleep. When he squints, he can pick out the smouldering stub of a cigarette in the distance, the flash of a lighter's glow reflecting on someone's spectacles - because these men matter, and the personal fuck-ups of his own sleeping pattern doesn't. "Something like that."

Dean looks at him, and there are things lost between them, but his eyes are careful and gentle now. As usual, he sees straight through Castiel. "Sir," he says, "when was the last time you slept?"

Castiel shifts, uncomfortable. “Last night,” he lies.

“Okay, well, first off, I don't believe that even for a second. And I mean actually sleeping – like, more than four hours in a row, horizontal.”

Castiel has no idea. Some sick part of him wants to say *England*, but that's probably not true. He must have slept comfortably at some point. There must have been some nights when he wasn't run off his feet busy all hours of the night, or up until oh-three-hundred worried sick about the next days' battle manoeuvres, or waking up in a cold sweat with terror crushing his chest. He says, “I don't know,” which is the first true thing he's said so far.

“Jesus.” Dean lets out his breath. “No wonder you fucking hit me.”

Castiel doesn't know how to answer that.

In the end, he settles for, “I'm not tired.” He says it even as he can feel bone-deep exhaustion weighing down on him. He has a dull ache behind his eyes, lead in his chest, a cramped muscle at the base of his neck that sets off shooting pain every time he turns his head. He doesn't know how long it's been this time. When he casts his memory back as far as he can, there are blank patches, moments where he doesn't know how he got from A to B. He figures some of those must be sleep. He has a vague recollection of checking his watch and noting with disinterest that he'd hit the thirty-six hour mark. He doesn't know when that was, though. It's hard to fit things together.

Dean heaves a sigh. He lifts his cigarette to inspect the smouldering end. “Okay, well, sir, you're sure as hell never going to get to sleep if you don’t even try.”

“I don't need to sleep,” Castiel snaps, “and I'm better off spending the time being useful than—” He cuts himself off. He drags a deep breath in through his nose, steadying.

“Than what?” Dean says. There is no judgement there. If anything, he says it like he already knows the answer. His voice is soft. Reassuring. Castiel doesn't want to hear that from him.

Castiel rolls his shoulders back, wincing as pain flares up hotly at the base of his neck. “It doesn't matter,” he says, and then, because he's an asshole and he can't stop: “Anyway, why would you care? You hate me.”

Dean makes a low, impatient noise in the back of his throat. He says, “I could never hate you.” He puts his cigarette to his mouth, breathes in deep. He exhales smoke. “Then again, my dad always says I don't have much sense, so.”

Castiel thinks of the moment he shoved Dean up against that wall in La Trinité, hand at his throat all threat and promise; he thinks of Dean, relaxing into the concrete like he was used to it. He thinks of his fist against Dean's jaw. His stomach is heavy with guilt, and he is so very tired. He doesn't even feel like he has the strength to keep breathing.

Castiel doesn't know why he says it. He inhales, and as he lets the air out, slow and shaky, he says, “Every time I go to sleep I have to go through it again.”

Dean doesn't look at him; he doesn't ask. He just stands there, the cigarette casting a dim glow to catch at his chin, the slope of his nose, and he waits.

“At first it's La Trinité,” Castiel says, because now he's started, he may as well finish. “The Graf Spee guns, the retreat. And then--” His mouth is open but he can't get the words out. He feels it tighten in his chest like the thing he can't say is too big for his body, and it fills his throat until he can feel something sting in the back of his eyes. He forces himself to exhale, to relieve some of the pressure. His breath is long and slow, shaking out of his mouth. “It all gets mixed together.”

Dean turns his head halfway towards Castiel – not quite looking at him, but close. He takes his cigarette from his mouth, flicks the stub away to smoulder in the dirt. “I'm sorry,” he says, and that's all. It's the simplest thing in the world, his voice quiet, but it's sincere, and it twists through Castiel like shrapnel. He wants to stop feeling like this. He wants to tell Dean everything.

“The worst part of--” Castiel can't say it. It snags like a fish-hook in his throat. He takes a deep breath, “--what happened... is – is that I don't even remember it.” He speaks slowly, voice even and careful. This thought has been keeping him awake for weeks; he doesn't need to fall apart at the confession of it. “I remember how it felt. I remember that – frequently. The – panic. The numb cold, the fear,” he says, and he can feel it creeping towards him again like the turning of the tide. “My hands shaking. That comes back to me. Again, again and again, that does come back to me, but I don't--”

Dean reaches out a hand for Castiel's arm. “Sir--”

“I don't actually know what happened,” Castiel says, and there is the truth. “I don't know what he said to me – I don't know if he said anything to me. I don't if he was scared, if it hurt, I don't--” The words are spilling out of his mouth now, faster than he can reign them back in, and he can feel something breaking in his throat that hitches up with his breath until he thinks that he's choking on it. “I don't know if I said goodbye.”

Castiel looks at Dean, and everything in him feels sick. There is a

storm swirling violent in the pit of his gut and usually it settles at the sight of Dean, but today – today there is Dean's hand on Castiel's forearm, and a chasm between them that Castiel no longer has the power to bridge. He fucked up. He fucked up badly, and he thought he just didn't know how to do this without Inias, but the truth of it is that he doesn't know how to do this at all.

“It's okay, sir. Just – talk to me,” Dean says. “Sir?” He swallows, and he says, “Cas?”

“I--” Castiel doesn't get anywhere. He thinks he might throw up, or cry, or both. He has his hand so tightly clenched into fists that his knuckles ache, but he doesn't know how to let go. Castiel doesn't know how to say that all he wants is for everything to stop, for this moment to last and there to be no more need for him as commander, that he's terrified it wouldn't make a difference even if the whole world did stop, because he has ruined so much of whatever was between them – so he doesn't say any of it. He stands there, his whole body locked up tense, and he tries to remember how to breathe, and he knows he has to say something. The first thing out of his mouth is all wrong: he says, “I want you to kiss me,” his voice a low croak, rough with shame.

Dean's mouth opens, and there is a flicker of something painful across his expression. He leans back a little. “Sir--”

Castiel looks away. “Fuck. I know. I'm sorry.”

“We gotta talk about this, is all, because I can't just--”

“I know,” Castiel says again. “Okay, I know. I wasn't saying you should, I just... I want you to. Irrationally, I do.”

Dean is quiet, and then he leans forwards, his boots creaking at the ankle as he tilts across, and he presses his mouth to Castiel's forehead. Instinctively, Castiel thinks that they cannot be doing this, but they are far from the men here; they are concealed in the dark here. Everyone is going to bed and no-one is looking for him yet. Dean's lips are warm and dry, and Castiel feels any fight left in him drain away completely. He sags at the spine and shoulders, leaning into the touch, and his eyes fall closed. It is all he can do to keep breathing.

“I'm sorry,” he says, voice strangled, and he presses his face into Dean's jaw. “I'm sorry.” Back in Alsdorf, he couldn't get the words out, no matter how hard he tried. Now he can't stop. “For everything, I'm – I'm sorry.”

“Look, it's – complicated, okay,” Dean says quietly, mouth soft against Castiel's brow. “It's pretty fucked up, I'm not gonna say it's not. And we have to talk about it soon, but we don't have to talk about it now.”

Castiel swallows. “Thank you.”

Dean butts his nose gently against Castiel's hairline. “Any time, sweetheart,” Dean says, and his hand comes up to curl around the back of Castiel's neck. His fingers sweep through the base of his hair, his thumb brushing behind his ear, and fuck, Castiel loves him.

Dean's hand is slow and careful, and Castiel is in love with him, and it doesn't feel the way he thought it would. He doesn't feel different. He just hitches in a tiny breath, and he fills up his lungs with the space between them, the knowledge that Dean is here, after everything, not forgiving him, but here nonetheless. He doesn't know how this happened – when half the time he feels as though he doesn't even like Dean – but Jesus, he loves him.

“Dean,” Castiel says, voice hoarse, and he can't say any more than

that, but his hands come up to Dean's waist and curl into his clothes.

“Yeah, I'm here.” Dean's hand soothes through Castiel's hair, as gentle as anything, and Castiel all at once feels he is suffocating under it and wants to be closer. Dean kisses Castiel's forehead, presses his face into Castiel's hair, and Castiel leans into him. “I'm not going anywhere.”

Castiel closes his eyes. Somewhere in the distance, towards Aachen, he can hear mortars going off, steady and near-rhythmic, the impact faintly vibrating through the ground and up through Castiel's knees. They are not far enough from the men here, and someone will be looking for Castiel if he stays away too long. He'll need to go back soon, but for now he settles for this, for the touch of Dean's hands.

Chapter 14: Aachen

Chapter Notes

Special warnings for this chapter: passing mentions of suicide and self-injury.

12th October, 1944

Dear Sam,

So you know how you were saying we were gonna get take it easy for a while, hang out at the back of the line? What was it you said – something about how they wouldn't be crazy enough to get us going after another big city? Well, you owe me five bucks. I can't say much more than that, but that's what going on over here, so I dunno when I'll be able to write next. Otherwise, things are going okay here. The lieutenant and I are back on speaking terms, at least. Like I said, it's complicated. Wouldn't translate well in a letter. Just trust me, we had a professional conversation like a pair of adults and now it's fine. Aren't you proud? The weather sucks, so a couple guys are coming down with colds, which is a real pain in my ass, to tell the truth. I'm trying to go around taking care of the guys with shrapnel in their backs, with dislocated shoulders and all, and these goddamn replacements keep coming up like, doc, doc, I got a real sore throat. Whatever.

Where the hell is Stanford? I've never heard of it. It's not one of those ones in Missouri, is it? There are plenty good schools in Kansas. And don't start that whole shit with me, okay, I'm well aware that Europe is a hell of a lot further from Lawrence than goddamn Missouri or Stanford wherever – but I'm not gonna be here long. Now that we're pushed up into Germany, some guys are saying it's not long before we get Berlin. One big push and we could be home by Christmas – that's what Kevin says, anyway. He got a baby niece born just last week so he wants to get home and see her. Hell, I'll go and see Kevin's niece if it means I get out of the rain. Still no news on any of us every getting that furlough, by the way. Back at Brest, they said they'd make sure all of us who applied who had good records would get at least a goddamn weekend, but apparently that's just the same old crock of

shit.

Tell Jess I said well done on getting into the newspaper. Seriously, that's amazing. Don't know how a great girl like that ended up with my idiot brother, but I guess wonders never cease! By the way, that riddle of hers went down really well with the guys. I didn't have a goddamn clue, but Joe and Charlie, they were eating that shit up, talking about it all goddamn week. Charlie got it in the end, and they're both begging me for another one, so if Jess thinks up another one, you tell us, alright? Novak liked it too. Then again, he's smart like that, so he would.

Let me know when dad shows up, and take care of that cough, alright? I gotta run, but you take care! I'll write when I can. Kevin and Harry say hi. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

13th October, 1944

At oh-three-hundred hours, Baker are formed up ready to move out, along with the rest of the 116th. In the far distance, Aachen rumbles as though in sleep, the night quiet and still around it but for dimly chattering gunfire. Towards the front of the formation, Castiel glances along the parade of 2nd Battalion, at where he can faintly see Cain, Azazel, then Gabriel, as indistinct silhouettes. At oh-three-fifteen they move.

Clanking dully in the dark, they march. Boots squelch; a fine mist of rain hangs in the air that chills Castiel's fingers and makes his hands

slippery on his rifle. “You know your orders?” Castiel says to Lieutenant Shurley, alongside him in rank. He keeps his voice low.

“Uh. Yes, sir.”

“And you keep your radio on at all times, do I make myself clear?”

Chuck Shurley clears his throat. “Yes, sir.”

Castiel is trying to find a professional way to express that if Shurley disappears during combat again, Castiel will shoot him himself. “You make sure your whole platoon understand upcoming orders and movements. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Castiel lets his breath out, lets his brain focus on the rhythmic one-two, left-right. Up ahead, the city starts to flicker white and orange around the edges.

There is the low, building drone of the US Ninth Air Force sweeping in, and then, soundlessly, Aachen ignites.

Shouting begins all along the formation as the Battalion splits, and Castiel picks it up – *now, Baker, peel left* – and Able and Baker veer off eastwards. They move off the MSR to push into wide flat patches of farmland, over which can be seen the rooftops of Würselen, the northernmost suburb, and beyond that, the brightly burning spire of Aachen Cathedral like a beacon. The formation flattens out into an extended line to sweep across the field, Baker breaking up into platoons first, then squads, then individual fire-teams. Castiel falls into

the middle, tucked somewhere in between two- and three-platoon, Aaron Bass at his nine o'clock with the radio on his back quietly humming.

This far out from the Aachen, there is only a handful of houses clustered along each road as they press in towards, but the buildings grow gradually denser, more closely situated. They climb rain-sloppy embankments at the roadsides, press through narrow strips of woodland where the trees are bent as though to block their way, leaves all the colours of the sunset and rustling as they fall. The crunching underfoot alone is enough to make Castiel think that all Germany between here and Berlin must know they're coming.

Overhead, another B-17 bomber comes roaring, engines gunning. Castiel supposes their arrival was never exactly going to have the element of surprise. They cut fast over the field, rushing up into the territory of small heat houses, and they crash like dominoes against the garden wall as they run up, man by man, and press themselves against the dark brick.

Castiel waits on one knee, watching his men go. He already drilled them on their orders before they moved up – four-platoon waiting at this RVP-one, two-platoon moving up along the MSR towards Broichweiden while one- and three-platoon flank around Lindenerstraße, clearing a path so that four-platoon can press forwards later and lay down a base of mortar-fire from the churchyard. The men know what they're doing.

The drumming of gunfire, at first faint, now grows inescapable, shaking through the air. Underneath it is the dull, heavy sound of artillery, an unsteady rhythm that thumps and stutters out of time before it tears down the rooftops. In the distance, there is fire, tall flames crawling out of broken windows. Castiel signals to Virgil. They move.

“Milligan, take a fire-team left, clear that alley,” Virgil calls out as

they go, punctuating his orders with short, sharp gestures of his free hand. “Sorento, keep right – head for that white building at the end.”

Second-squad veer left, Spangler leading the way as he weaves left through a narrow space between two fire-hollowed automobiles, and then there is a short, sharp bang. Perversely, Castiel is so used to the deafening slam of railway gun shells that, at first, he only flinches back and thinks, *is that it?*

Then it sinks in. Someone is screaming, so high-pitched that their voice cracks, and it claws into Castiel's spine until every muscle in his body tenses, and at last, he sees: the thick red mist sprayed across the two vehicles, the meat, the – *fuck* – that's an arm from the elbow down, on the shattered windshield of the second truck.

Behind Castiel, a voice starts up with *medic, we need a medic in first squad,* and then a burst of machine-gun fire opens up ahead of them, and out of the corner of Castiel's eye, he sees Private Maier's knees get cut out from underneath him, and he collapses heavily like his strings have been cut.

Castiel yells, “Contact front, contact front,” as he scrambles into cover, rounds hissing behind him to crack against the dirt. Panic tightens in his chest like a vice around his ribs. Spangler is still screaming, and then Dean comes barrelling past with his head ducked low, one hand braced over the top of his helmet. Castiel reaches out on instinct. “Winchester - careful--”

Dean ignores him. He leaps inelegantly over brick rubble, comes weaving past, pausing to bang his fist hard against the side of a car that some of one-platoon are using as cover for their base of fire, and he yells, *friendly,* before passing their arcs of fire. Then, in an instant, he is on his knees at Spangler's side. Faintly, Castiel can hear him speak: “Hey, Harry, I'm here, okay, it's not that bad. I got you, it's not that bad.” There is blood surging out across the concrete, bright and hot.

Castiel tries to breathe as his brain assesses almost faster than he can process – is it the one mine, or are there more? Can they afford to take cover? Are they being funnelled? Are they being surrounded? - and he swallows, hard. He can hear Virgil shouting out orders; it's his platoon, and he has it under control. Of all his platoon leaders, Castiel trusts Virgil. It's the others that he's concerned about now. If it's all going to shit here, then it's not long before it catches up with the rest of Baker – if it hasn't already. He presses himself back against the wall, and he peers carefully around for a visual.

Muzzle-flash, one o'clock, first storey of the house with the peeling brown windowsills. Possible additional gunner position between nine and ten o'clock, judged on the careful way that debris has been cleared. Potential position number two would also face onto the route that two-platoon will be taking when they flank around-- Castiel pushes himself up and he runs.

Twenty yards or so back, Morvey and Yen are on their bellies behind rubble and broken concrete, laying suppressive fire, and just a little further is Private Bass. Castiel steadies his helmet with one hand, clutches his M1 to his chest, and he pushes himself faster until he feels close to stumbling and his calves ache.

Morvey sees him and jerks his rifle up to stop shooting before Castiel gets into his arc of fire, and he shifts up to make room just as Castiel crashes down into the dust alongside them.

“Bass,” Castiel says breathlessly. “Call in to Lieutenant Shurley – probable gunner position observed, intersection of Eschweiler Street. Let's say... two hundred yards short of RVP-two.”

Bass nods, and he opens his mouth on a *yes, sir,* but his voice is drowned out by the rattle of the machine-gun starting up again, a sound like the crunch of broken teeth that has them flinching back

into the dirt.

As Bass starts shouting into the radio mouthpiece, Castiel looks over at where Virgil is giving orders, at where Ash Lowell is curling back his arm to throw a grenade, at where Maier is thrown flat on his back with a strangled, blood-wet noise in his throat. On the ground, one of the replacements, one Private Hough, squeezes off round after round – too fast – and Castiel can see dirt kick up some twenty feet ahead of him, every time. Castiel slaps a hand to his shoulder. “Slow down,” he shouts over the noise. “Pull your rifle tighter in your shoulder, and breathe.”

Shakily, Hough exhales, and he tenses, and he fires.

Bass' radio crackles as two-platoon responds, and Chuck Shurley's voice comes through. “Baker-six, this is Baker-two-one, I copy. Is there an alternate route proposed? Please advise. Over.”

Castiel takes the mouthpiece. “Baker-two-one, this is the six – no alternate route recommended, just be aware. Recommended course of action would be to send some grenadiers up to clear it before pushing the platoon through – take it building by building. Don't take any chances. Over.”

There's a momentary delay on the line, and then: “Roger that. Over and out.”

Castiel pushes the radio back at Bass, and is clambering to his feet when there is a dull, heavy sound that reverberates through the air, as of someone kicking a tree. Out loud, Castiel says, “Fucking--” and then yells, “Take cover, everyone take--”

The first shell hits.

It punches up a thick, dark plume of smoke and dirt that strikes somewhere between Castiel and the front of one-platoon, and then again, again – hitting the ground in a progressing line that tears up the street, kicks up cobbles and concrete. Castiel doesn't know how he missed it. Now that it flashes and quakes violently ahead of them, there's no missing the Panzer some four hundred yards from them, but it was camouflaged. He tells himself he couldn't have known; it was camouflaged. There are a few seconds where Castiel keeps yelling for them to *move, move, clear the fucking street,* and then that's all the time he has, and he runs.

The air around them seems to vibrate with the sound of it, the tank spitting fire from its position tucked between two crumbling houses – something that wasn't in the fucking intelligence – and the shells slam down hard enough that it feels as though the earth bucks violently beneath Castiel's feet. His hearing is gone, everything dimmed down to a rolling, high-pitched sound that he can feel in the back of his teeth, and he is half-blind with smoke and rubble, and he doesn't know where to run.

He lets go of his rifle, lets it bang clumsily against his thigh in its sling as he sprints, and he thinks, *not today, not today, please, God, not today*, and he can't see where he's going, and then a shell smacks hard into the concrete some five feet ahead of him.

Castiel reels instinctively back in panic, but his body doesn't get the message that his feet have stopped. His boots go out from underneath him, and he crashes down onto the road, landing so hard on his bad shoulder that pain momentarily blinds him, his vision broken up as he gasps for air. His eyes are swimming in tears, and all that he knows is that he is curled on his side in the middle of the road, without any cover, and shells bigger than his head are crashing down to earth all around him, and he can't move except to throw his arms up over his head. His ears are ringing, and he is unable to see anything of his company through the darkly twisting smoke and the debris that falls slow and dreamy like snow.

They didn't have intelligence on the Panzer Brigade extending down out this far from the centre of Aachen, and yet now the entire fucking street is being decimated by a single tank. The shells crash and crash, with no sign of ending, and Castiel struggles to breathe through the white-hot pain in his shoulder. *Please, please, not today, not today, not me.*

The barrage seems to last and last, and then when it does end, it takes Castiel a long moment to realise. He has his arms curled up over his head, his face tucked into his elbows, and he can't hear anything but a wavering whine inside his skull, and so it is only the quiet stillness of the earth beneath him that lets him know it's over.

Slowly, Castiel uncurls. He hauls himself up onto his hands and knees, and for a second he can't get any further, his arms shaking violently beneath his weight as he tries to get up. He pulls in a long, ragged breath as he tucks one foot underneath him to get himself up, and in a voice that feels hoarse but that he can barely hear, he shouts, “Pull back – pull back!”

He straightens, and he sees the road mangled all the way down the intersection, holes punched into the tarmac and concrete, rubble spilling down from buildings where they are leaning towards collapse with their walls blown half away. In the distance, the drumming of artillery can still be heard, interspersed with gunfire and yelling and the short, tinny sound of mines going off, but here, it is eerily quiet. Someone is screaming for a medic.

Castiel glances over, and through his shaking vision, he can see why: the Panzer is advancing. It moves in a slow crawl like some predatory animal, and gradually, the turret lifts.

All down the street, Baker men are picking themselves shakily up from whatever they cover they could find, and Castiel knows they have to get out of here. Even the machine-guns are quiet, but the Germans have near perfect enfilade from their position, and all they have to do

now is wait to pick up the pieces that the Panzer leaves behind.

“Pull back, everyone, move, now!” Castiel yells. He shouts for Bass – he needs to radio the other platoons, because three-platoon isn't far, and they all need to get out of here before the entire company is wiped out; he also needs to radio Battalion for some kind of air or heavy artillery support to clear this way into the city, or they're not going anywhere.

Castiel turns his head and yells again, “Bass – on me--” and then he gets no further, because there amongst the rubble and the broken things is Morvey, and Yen, and Bass. A near-direct hit: Yen's face mangled, Bass' body looking dark and small, Morvey struggling slowly against the dirt. Castiel can hear bone grating against the concrete.

There isn't time to let it sink in. Castiel shouts again, *pull back, pull back*, while Virgil's voice picks up the call further down the street, and then Castiel moves. He runs back along the road until he finds Sergeant Milligan, and he grabs a handful of his sleeve.

Milligan jerks back automatically. He looks over, and does a double-take, recoiling. “Fuck, sir, you okay?”

“I'm fine – Morvey's down that way, maybe twenty yards, and he's hit,” Castiel says urgently, and he can hear the way that his voice is cracked and rough, as his hearing slowly comes back. “Can you get him evac'd?”

Milligan nods. “Yes, sir.”

“Take Harman with you – you grab him, you get him back to RVP-one, is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Harman and Milligan take off, and in an instinctive gesture, Castiel goes to flatten his hand over the top of his helmet – except he touches only his own wet hair. For some reason, he isn't wearing his helmet anymore, and his hand comes away bloody. For a moment, he looks at it – blood smeared unevenly across his palm, seeping into the lines and cracks and callouses – and then he wipes his hand on his combat jacket. His hands are perfectly steady.

Castiel adjusts his grip on his rifle, and continues to run. He yells for them to move out, pull back, they'll find another way through, and the machine gun opens up at their backs.

One-platoon pulls back to their original rendez-vous point, radio in to Battalion about their casualties and put down a request for a scout car to evacuate. Castiel doesn't know what else to do but retreat and brace against a counter-attack. They've lost so many new replacements that they can't retrieve all the bodies, and then word comes back that the scout car for their priority casualties will take longer than anticipated: there are anti-tank traps all throughout the city, and military vehicles are being incapacitated left, right, and centre, tires shredded and axels blown off, engines igniting so that the passengers don't even time to get clear.

By that point, they've lost three more to their injuries, Private Pye spasming violently in Kevin Tran's hold as his brain swells inside his skull – but there's no time to dwell on that. They keep moving. Behind them, the sun is rising, smoky and pale.

16th October, 1944

The street is lit up with colours, red and yellow faintly twisting upwards as smoke grenades hiss amongst the rubble, and overheard is the sharp clatter of gunfire that has Castiel pressed low for cover.

Baker Company, along with the rest of the 116th, had no success breaking through the German line of defence within Aachen – almost as though the brass' bright idea of ordering a unit already on the defensive to start aggressively pushing back south may not have entirely thought through – and are now trying a different tactic. They have picked themselves up from where they lay licking their wounds at a safe distance, and are trying for Würselen again, along another sector of the city.

Castiel overheard the losses so far in the latest briefing: more than four hundred dead, injured not yet accounted for. He is trying not to think about it every time a man goes down.

Now they run fast over uneven, shell-shattered tarmac, Aachen flickering and booming ahead of them like a firecracker. The new objective is to capture and clear Würselen via a flanking manoeuvre, with the 119th sweeping south on their right flank to make contact with 1st Division at the Aachen-Julich highway, surrounding the town, while the 120th and 117th launch company-strength diversionary assaults to the far side. It's a good plan – definitely better than the one they were trying to pull the last few days. It's only unfortunate that this tactic couldn't have been proposed earlier.

They clear through a row of tall brick houses, grenades through broken windows; they lay down smoke to cross the intersection, and they take it building by building. Sergeant Garrigan's squad peels off left to sweep through the narrow labyrinth of alleyways, and Castiel yells himself hoarse, steers his platoon-leaders with clear, sharp gestures – two- and three-platoon up to the next intersection, two-hundred yards; four-platoon deliberate rate of fire on the top of the three-storey house until it's gone; one-platoon maintain pressure on enemy position until the signal to switch fire – and a thundering of machine-gun fire cuts down Private Roth, knocks Bradbury back onto his ass with his helmet thrown off and a bloody ear, but otherwise unharmed.

There are riflemen in the wide brown tenement up ahead, a large, curved thing that straddles the bend in the road, and as Baker advances on it, the heavy sound of artillery firing can be heard. Castiel is now used to way his throat constricts with fear, and he breathes through it.

He yells, “I need eyes on!”

Within an instant, the answer comes back: “Contact right, four-hundred yards – the park, base of rearmost tree!”

Castiel takes off in search of his leaders, and he shouts as he goes. “Four-platoon, stay on the three-storey – one-platoon suppressive fire on that artillery, moving up to clear. Get some dynamite in that thing, take it out – three-platoon on the building centre of axis, one hundred yards, we've got at least one gunner position inside – two-platoon on reserve, extended line of defence at our six!”

The Germans have the advantage here in that they know this city; they've been using basements and sewers as fortified pillboxes, and they can move swiftly to establish new positions all the time. They got intelligence this morning on this section of Aachen being choked with these small, semi-mobile gunner positions and Castiel doesn't want them to be so focused on one target that they allow themselves to be surrounded and cut off.

As the platoon-leaders go off to execute their orders, Castiel ducks back down behind a low, breathing steady through the bullets singing off the brickwork. He turns the corner fast, rifle pulled up into his shoulder, and he fires. He moves with second squad up through the next house, exhaling along the cheek-piece. Calahee screams a warning in German – *geben Sie auf* – and they flinch back from grenade that Private Bearcey hurls in through the open window – one thousand, two thousand, three – and the grenade detonates. It coughs out dust and smoke from the door, and First Sergeant Masters leads the way in.

Castiel looks over the disoriented men struggling up from the floor amongst the debris, at the boy of maybe nineteen who fumbles in the dirt for his carbine before Masters puts three rounds through his chest. The others surrender.

Castiel makes for the table at the back wall, collecting near-illegible heaps of German paperwork, and he stuffs it into his combat jacket. “Masters,” he says, “Take a squad and clear the rest of the tenement. Bearcey, Turner, process these guys, get them searched and delivered back to Battalion. The rest of you, get back out there.”

Calahee nods. “Yes, sir.”

Castiel heads back out to a bright flash of phosphorus and slowly uncoiling smoke, a fervent red against the dimly grey sky. Four-platoon has punched a ragged crater in the clock tower that spills smoke, and they pack up their mortar tripods now to move fast along the road to the next position. Overhead, a low-flying Thunderbolt comes roaring over with a noise like a hurricane that vibrates shingles off rooftops, and the German gun starts up again.

“Let's move, let's move,” Castiel shouts as the first shell builds from a shrill whistle to a scream, and he sweeps his hand over to direct the men running up behind him – Rosen, and Armstrong, and Ellsworth, with a squad of replacements at their rear. “Get out of the street, now! Lowell – take them up to that corner and move them up along there, stay close to the wall!”

Ash goes, moving fast, and Castiel runs the opposite way, pushes himself hard for a doorway on the far side of the street where he can get some cover. He nearly turns his ankle over on some loose rubble, and his hands tighten on his rifle as he sprints, and then he crashes hard into the locked door, and he presses himself tight against the wood, out of sight. He looks back towards one-platoon advancing on

the German artillery position in spite of the fire being opened upon them, and then he sees.

Sergeant Johnny Mills is flat on his back in the street, legs moving feebly. The heel of his boot drags across the ground. He stretches one arm out for his rifle, but it's fallen beyond his reach, and he can't move to grab it. Castiel doesn't know where he's hit, but he can see that he can't lift his head – spinal injury, at the very least.

Castiel twists his head, pulls in a deep breath, and yells – *medic, we need a*-- and before he can even finish, Dean is there, barging through the rest of three-platoon shoulder-first. He skirts rubble, slaps a quick hand to the backs of soldiers before he passes them to let them know that he's there, runs fast and low to the casualty. He drops to his knees, and there is already a bundle of cloth in one side to suppress the bleeding, and his hands are blood-red rucking up Mills' jacket and shirt to inspect the damage.

There isn't time for Castiel to simply stand here and watch. He brings his rifle up, and tilts out of the cover of the doorway to aim for the tenement building, tracing muzzle-flash through his iron-sight, and he starts firing. He breathes the way they told him to. He takes one shot every six seconds, deliberate fire. He sees one silhouette slump over within a window, and he holds his breath. He fires again.

As Castiel lowers his weapon, he makes the mistake of looking back over at Dean. Through the smoke and dust, Castiel can see him: his lips moving to speak to Johnny, his mouth caught in an easy half-smile as he glances across to meet Johnny's eyes – and all the while, his hands moving quick and steady with scissors, with sulfa powder. Bullets snap through the air around him, cracking off nearby walls and shattering windows, and Dean doesn't flinch. He speaks calmly to Johnny, and when a shell goes off some fifty feet behind him, he barely blinks. Johnny is nodding loosely, colour draining from his face as he jerks and shakes, and Dean's going to lose him. He's going to lose him. He's going to--

Castiel is having trouble breathing. He opens his mouth and he inhales, he inhales, but something is choking him, something tight and broken that seizes in his chest, and he can't breathe. He's going to lose him. He's going to lose him. He doesn't know what to do.

There is the wall in front of him, the apartment building on the other side of the road with the windows blown out, and nothing feels as real as the panic climbing in his throat. He's going to lose him and there's nothing he can do.

Someone crashes into Castiel from behind, and Castiel lets out all the air in his lungs in one shaky burst.

“Lieutenant Novak, sir!”

Castiel turns to see Private Concino at his back, his face dirt-smeared and questioning, and he forces himself to drag in a breath that shivers all the way down. “Concino,” he says, and his voice comes out far away from himself. “What--”

“Sir – word in from Battalion,” Concino says, and he comes in close with the mouth-piece of his radio pressed close to his chest. “About the objective.”

Castiel reaches out and takes the mouth-piece. It doesn't feel like his hand on the plastic. “This is Baker-six, our status is--”

He is swiftly interrupted by Major Campbell, who tells him that the objective at the MSR has been cleared, the 119th having met the 1st Division up on the Aachen-Julich highway. His new orders are to clear this section of Würselen as planned, but then to pull his men back to a defensive position at Hauptstraße. They'll link with Able and Charlie Company, and the 116th will extend to link with the 119th, and

complete the encirclement of the area, prepared for the inevitable counter-attack – ETA fifteen-hundred-hours. Castiel thanks him, hangs up the mouth-piece, and passes the order on.

Within forty-five minutes, Alistair and four-platoon have decimated the upper half of the street's buildings, and the rest of the men have cleared through every house in this section of the street, and Castiel pulls them back. Some miles ahead of them, Aachen continues to flicker with fire and crumble in pillars of thick black smoke.

They set up a perimeter between the hospital and the Stadtgarten, and as Virgil, Shurley, Hester, and Alistair go about checking the line and setting up interlocking arcs of fire, Castiel goes to the far end to ensure their link with the rest of the Battalion is solid.

Technically, he doesn't need to, as he could send a runner in his place, but he feels as though he needs to be moving. If he walks and walks and does not stop, then he doesn't have to think about terror sitting heavy in his gut, leftover from the moment when he saw Dean working to save Johnny Mills, when everything inside him froze and he lost himself somewhere between here and Recouvrance. If he keeps moving, there's no time for the exhaustion of this never-ending assault on Aachen to catch up with him, the days and days and sleepless nights of offensive, defensive, again and again as the Germans flee and counter-attack by turn. Castiel doesn't think about how his hands only start to tremble once the firefight is over.

He navigates through the winding streets, the destroyed houses, until he finds a cluster of unfamiliar soldiers establishing a sentry point on Baker's right flank. “Thunder,” he says, even though he can see the insignia of the Blue and Grey on their arms.

One of them looks up, startled. “Flash.” There's a red cross emblazoned on his helmet, and Castiel vaguely recognises him – a young combat medic from Gabriel's company, someone Dean and Baker's other medics have occasionally had to work with when they

were particularly short on plasma and morphine. Lenore, or something like that. Technician Grade Five. “You need a hand, lieutenant?”

“Do you know where I could find Captain Laufeyson?” Castiel asks.

Lenore points. “Company CP is that way. Three hundred yards or so.”

“Thank you.” Castiel heads down the road, but before he reaches the CP, he comes across Gabriel – striding fast between sentry posts, leafing through an enormous quantity of crumpled and blood-stained papers. “Captain--”

Gabriel doesn't slow down; he barely glances up. “Novak – hi. You're linked up on our left, right?”

“Yes, we're--”

“Great, good stuff. How you doing? Hell of a day, huh – excuse me – Corporal – get this to Adina ASAP, will you? And tell him I needed the action report fifteen minutes ago!” Gabriel's pace doesn't even falter, and he throws a distracted, harried look over his shoulder at Castiel. “Sorry. You were saying?”

Castiel follows him as best as he can, and he starts to speak again. “I wanted to confirm that the link was solid--”

Gabriel tucks a small piece of paper into his mouth while he folds two others in half to stuff into his combat jacket. “Mm-hm?” He turns a map over and scrutinises it.

“--and to speak with you regarding patrol rotas for the duration of this position--”

“Mm-hm.” Gabriel takes the paper out of his mouth. “Jeez. Okay. Novak, can I get back to you on that? I'm up to my rapidly receding hairline in shit right now, I'm watching it roll downhill faster than I can clear a path for it – I'll find you later. Is that good?”

Castiel nods mutely, and he stops walking. Gabriel doesn't seem to notice as he storms off down the line of his company. Castiel swallows, and he turns back the way he came.

Back at Baker, things are similarly chaotic. Dread curls within Castiel, and he presses down upon it like a bruise to feel it ache and then settle. Status report to Battalion, assessing intelligence gathered, taking in medical reports, action reports, lists of ammunition use, requests for replens – it makes Castiel's head spin. First Sergeant Masters is coming up to announce that someone lost a helmet, someone lost their musette bag, someone's webbing strap is broken; Lieutenant Shurley returns again and again to double-check that he's writing his report correctly, to the extent that Castiel is three seconds from snapping at Shurley to just hand the fucking thing over and Castiel can do it himself.

There are losses to be processed, notes to be made on the way they died: Roth, Pye, Morvey, Maier, Sergeant Mills – fuck. Castiel palms off his helmet, scrapes a hand backwards through his sweaty hair. They lost Mills after all.

For a moment, it overwhelms him – he's known Mills since basic: four fucking years – and every crappy joke Mills has ever told, every sarcastic retort to mouthy replacements, it plays over again in his head. He breathes. He retrieves a slip of paper from his webbing and he scribbles down *Sergeant John Mills* with the rest of them. He breathes.

He lifts his head, and he looks over the men of Baker Company as they settle into their defensive positions and pick themselves up – eating their rations, cleaning their weapons, smearing fresh camouflage cream onto their faces, talking shit and laughing loudly to try and dissipate the adrenalin. There, off towards three-platoon, is Dean.

He is stood off to one side, wiping his hands clean. However, as Castiel watches, he realises that Dean doesn't have a cloth or anything which with to actually make himself cleaner; he just rubs his hands over and over one another, making no difference to the state of his dry, darkly stained skin. Over and over. Over and over.

Castiel lowers his pencil. He puts away his reports and his paper, and he gets up, and he heads towards him. “Winchester,” he says, as he approaches, and Dean doesn't react. He keeps rubbing his hands together. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Dean looks away over his shoulder at where the staff from the battalion aid station are working with Baker's casualties, and he shrugs loosely. His hands move over each other, distractedly scrubbing. “I've got notes written up already on the casualties, so I'll get those to you within the next hour or something.”

“Alright,” Castiel says. “And you?”

Dean looks over, seemingly surprised. “Me?” He gives a half-laugh that sounds more nervous than anything. “Yeah, I'm, uh. I'm great. Fuck, you wanna see something?” Finally, his hands become still, and he crosses the distance between them. He holds one hand up horizontal between them, and it takes Castiel a moment to figure out what he is looking at, and then he realises: Dean's hand is shaking. “Weird, huh?” Dean clenches his hand into a fist and then shakes it out hard. Dean laughs again, but the sound is a little forced. “Never done that before. Weird.”

Castiel lifts his eyes from Dean's hand to his face, but Dean is oblivious, his expression somewhere between anxious and grinning as he stares at his hand. Castiel touches a hand to Dean's elbow, light and awkwardly professional, and he says, “You should sit down. Come on.”

For once, Dean does as he's told, and he follows when Castiel directs him to the crumbling front steps up to a grand old house, and he sits. He settles back on the concrete, and then there is the deafening roar of a shell overhead, heavy and screaming like a railway gun.

Castiel instinctively freezes up, and his head snaps around, assessing – but the sound is all wrong, and sure enough, the noise builds and builds and then is abruptly gone, and in the near, distance Castiel watches it punch into the far west of Aachen, a tall plume of smoke and fire twisting up.

Castiel lets out his breath, and he tries to coax his muscles into relaxing. He rolls his shoulders until his back pops, and he swallows down the spike of panic telling him to run, organise his men, get on the front line and be sure that everything is ready – they're fine for now. There will be a counter-attack, and they will have to hold on tight to what little ground they have gained, and they will lose more men, but for ten minutes or so, they are safe as they have been in weeks.

Castiel crouches before Dean, and as he starts to dig into the pouches of his webbing for a D-ration, or something to give Dean to help with his blood sugar, he says, “Take some water on. And breathe.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Yes, doc.” As Castiel rummages, Dean lets out a breath that is long and slow and shaky. “Jesus. Never had this happen before. Fuck. Okay.”

“You'll come down in a second, it's okay.”

Dean lets out a wobbly laugh. “You know – some guys, they get all fired up like this, they, uh--” His voice cuts out. He clears his throat and tries again. “They get stiff.”

Castiel lifts his eyes to Dean's, eyebrows raised.

“Not me, though,” Dean says. A P-47 comes sweeping over, its engines gunning loudly as it trails smoke across the hazy sky, and it veers towards Aachen centre. “Clearly.”

The first pouch Castiel comes to is all loose M1 rounds he has yet to fit into a clip; the second is a pen, a few leafs of crumpled, rolled paper for writing reports on, since he ran out of space in his notebook somewhere around Alsdorf; in the third pouch he finds a D-ration chocolate bar, and as he pulls it out, something else comes free. It falls out of the pouch at his side, but Castiel leaves it as he hands the candy over to Dean before he goes to retrieve it.

“Eat this – it'll help,” he says, and he looks over to see Dean's eyes on the floor. Dean's eyes flash up to Castiel's, and he takes the candy bar wordlessly from Castiel's hand.

Castiel turns at the waist to retrieve whatever had fallen – a slip of crumpled paper that reads, *Lieutenant Wallace,* in Castiel's tidy, spiky script. In the damp, the ink has swollen and bled. Castiel snatches it up, crumples it in his fist, and shoves it into the pocket of his combats. He doesn't meet Dean's eyes.

Silently, Dean unwraps the candy bar and starts to eat it. Castiel packs

the contents of his webbing away, and he adjusts his pouches. He retrieves his canteen and drinks a mouthful of water before he holds it out to Dean.

Dean glances at him and away again. “Thanks.” He takes the canteen, and drinks. He wipes his mouth roughly with the back of his hand, and passes it back.

“How are the men doing?” Castiel asks, for a change of topic.

Dean shrugs loosely. “Tired. Cold. There's this bug going around, too, which you probably already know about - coughs and sneezes being great for tactical silence, you know.”

Much to Castiel's annoyance, he is aware of the bug going around, and not least because of it disrupting noise discipline, but because he can feel it tickling in the back of his own throat. That's not his concern, though. “Actually, I meant the casualties.”

“Oh.” Dean looks down at his hands. “Uh. Trenton got hit in the shoulder, Lietz got pinged twice in the side but he's more or less fine... Morment got shot through the shin. And we lost Roth... Gant and Baxter.” He is ticking them off his trembling fingers. “Lowry. Navarro. And--” His gaze shifts away; he swallows. “Johnny Mills. You know.”

Castiel hesitates. “I'm sorry about Sergeant Mills. I know you were friends.” He knows first-hand how useless it is to say this, and that it doesn't change anything. Still, he doesn't know what else to say. “I'm sorry."

Dean shrugs loosely, but he keeps his head down and he won't meet Castiel's gaze.

“Forgive me if I'm overstepping a line here,” Castiel says carefully, “but – I hope you know that it wasn't your fault.”

Dean's eyes snaps up to meet Castiel's. “I know that,” he says sharply. “Of course it wasn't my fault. Why the hell would it be my fault?”

Castiel opens his mouth and is about to make some kind of apology, but Dean doesn't stop there. He keeps going.

“He was hit like, four times – liver, spine, lung – I mean, Jesus, what was I supposed to do? He was never gonna – I was never--” Dean drags in a deep breath.

Castiel has seen this before in the way Dean talks about his father sometimes: overly nonchalant to the point of being almost dismissive, talking it down. *Me and my father, we get along great, even if he does regularly tell me that I'm useless, but whatever, we're really close.* Castiel watches him trip over himself, and something in him aches and aches.

“I mean – yeah, he had a sucking chest wound, so maybe if I'd – if I'd got there faster, I could done more to keep his lung from collapsing, but.” Dean rolls his head over to the side. He scrubs a hand down over his mouth, then passes it over the back of his head. “His liver – he was gonna bleed out anyway. How am I supposed to suppress the bleeding from four different – I was never gonna--”

“Dean,” Castiel says.

“It's fine,” Dean says. His voice is as bright as ever, but the way that he shrugs his shoulders is slightly too exaggerated to the extent that it looks out of control, and he avoids Castiel's eyes. “Like you said. It's

not – whatever.”

Castiel swallows. He looks down at his hands. “Alright.” He clears his throat. “How do you feel now – did that D-ration help?”

“Yeah, fine.” Dean shakes his head. “Look, I'll live, okay. Just – you gotta go.”

“No,” Castiel says, and he reaches across to hold two fingers to Dean's pulse, just under his jaw – his hand angled so as not to cup Dean's face in his hand, because that would be unprofessional. Dean's pulse is still fast, but it doesn't seem erratic. “I can be here.”

Dean clears his throat loudly; Castiel feels it against his hand. “I said, Lieutenant, you've gotta go.”

Castiel looks up into Dean's face, and finds his eyes carefully unfocused on a middle distance past them. Castiel reads the hint. Behind them is the crunch of footsteps over dry leaves. He sits back on his heels, drawing his hands back into his own space. “Alright, take it easy, sergeant,” he says, voice clipped and neutral. “Rest for a moment, get your energy back up.”

Dean gives a neat nod. “Yes, sir.”

Castiel gets to his feet. “You should be fine in ten minutes or so.” He turns to find Lieutenant Virgil less than five feet behind them. “Virgil. How can I help you?”

Virgil looks over at Dean. “You alright, doc?”

Dean gives him a thumbs-up. The tremor in his hand is scarcely noticeable now. “Never better, sir.”

Virgil almost cracks a smile, and then he directs his attention back to Castiel. “The easternmost sentry point spotted something to our four o'clock – looks like it could be a Panzer turret.”

Castiel's stomach drops.

“What are your orders?”

“Show me,” Castiel says. “We'll send out a patrol to investigate. Destroy it if it's abandoned, call it in to Battalion S-2 otherwise. Fifteen men at most – primarily a rifle-team, but I want RPGs and mortars with them in case it goes south.” He glances back at Dean. “Can you take care of yourself?”

Dean gives him a grin that is as wide and sunny as his face is pale. It doesn't suit him; it doesn't reach his eyes. He has a rash along his jaw where the strap of his helmet has been rubbing, and a smear of blood over his temple, and he looks exhausted. “Hardly ever, sir,” he says cheerfully.

It's a joke; it's supposed to be funny. Castiel tries to smile, but all he can think of is the Panzer turret, a tank potentially bearing down on Baker's position, no room for reinforcements or heavy support unless they radio in to Battalion immediately – Castiel breathes, and he turns back to Virgil. “The eastern point, you said?”

“That's right.”

Castiel follows him away down the line, and he only looks back over his shoulder once. Dean is still sat on the bottom step, knees pulled up in front of him. He isn't paying attention; his gaze is lost somewhere near his boots. He scrubs idly over his hands together, palm over knuckles, fingers over palm. His skin is dark with blood, and it doesn't come off.

18th October, 1944

The northern sector of Aachen is mostly quiet, the night thick with fog and bitterly cold. The war can still be heard all around them, but the crash of shells is distant enough not to be a concern. Castiel has even unloaded his rifle.

The 26th Infantry are the ones spearheading the assault into central Aachen – a single regiment, at two-thirds strength, because apparently the United States Army enjoys underdog stories to excess – while the rest of the Allied forces on the ground concentrate all their efforts on keeping the perimeter secure, maintaining the ground they have already taken, and fending off the never-ending stream of counter-attacks. They are gradually gaining ground, but not without consequences. Castiel heard what happened on Crucifix Hill. He saw Naomi come back to Battalion for the latest briefing, shaken and pale-faced, bearing intelligence of the latest German artillery movements, and the news that his company was down forty-six men.

Castiel bends to retrieve his helmet – a new one, courtesy of Private Oliver taking three bullets to the collarbone, and having the same headband size – and he moves down the line.

Baker is occupying the terraced houses and store fronts along Haraner Gracht, with a view of the intersection at the Prager ringroad, and they made quick work of using comp-B to blow holes in the adjoining walls of each building so that one long continuous passageway was

created, the length of the street. It's too dangerous to venture into the street for any sustained period of time; this way, they can stay in cover.

Castiel steps over the rubble left over from the blast, wallpaper curling underfoot, chunks of drywall. Through the windows, the street is dark, moonlight strained through cloud cover so that everything is uniformly grey. In each room, there are scattered members of the company, sleeping by fire-team. Four-platoon upstairs, light artillery set up along windows and strategically-placed holes in the roofs; riflemen at the downstairs windows, technicians further back.

As Castiel walks, somebody shifts underneath blankets; someone mutters sleepily. Private Tran is stretched out, head pillowed on his musette bag. Through the next building, Corporal Montgomery has one bare foot propped up on his helmet, to allow air to get to the angry, brownish wound on his ankle where shrapnel must have sliced into his boot. It's nearing oh-three-hundred.

He navigates through the tangle of rooms, tobacco store bleeding into dining room into grocery store into front bedroom. Furniture has been pushed roughly aside, heavy cabinets leaving dark gouges in the floorboards where soldiers weren't careful. Castiel moves through into the next building, and then the still air is cut in half by a high, hissing noise, something that snaps and splutters.

Castiel's breath snags in his chest. His head snaps over, and he watches through the window as a red flare climbs higher into the night sky, trailing pale smoke. He watches it go, silent now, until it reaches its full height, and it hangs, suspended, in the air, eye-searingly bright and casts the whole street into flickering pink light.

Castiel turns sharply to call down the line. “I need a radioman onto Battalion, see if that's one of ours,” he shouts. “Zeddmore, Concino, call it in, now!”

There is stirring in sleeping bags as men are disturbed by the noise and the light; radiomen scramble for their mouth-pieces, speaking in hurried undertones to Battalion staff and to the other companies. In the meantime, Castiel stands frozen, his hands bunched into fists at his sides as he waits and waits. He wasn't warned about this, but then again, there have been some communication issues in the last few days. It's possible that this could just be--

In the next room, Concino lifts his head, radio mouth-piece tucked against his shoulder. “Negative from Battalion, Lieutenant Novak, that's a negative from Battalion issuing--”

Castiel's stomach turns over, and then he twists back and he yells, “Stand to!”

There's a long moment before it takes effect, while the men are groggily jolted from sleep and try to work out what's happening, and then the call is picked up down the length and breadth of the harbour area – *stand to, everybody up, stand fuckin' to* – and everything is chaotic with movement, with yelling.

Castiel starts running. “Stand to, everyone up, but stay in cover,” he shouts as he moves along the line, head ducked low. “Virgil – pull one-platoon back, I want them in reserve. Everyone else in established defensive positions, interlocking arcs of fire on three-sixty degrees!”

Hester barely pauses, his hands moving swiftly to feed stray, disorganised rounds into the chamber of his M1, and they pass each other without slowing. “Copy that.”

As everyone moves, some up and out of foxholes to reinforce their cover, some working together to secure a gunner tripod, Castiel runs

to check that each platoon is safe and that their drills are playing out smoothly. Riflemen prop their weapons on the windowsills, taking a knee to steady the butt in their shoulder; machine-gunners adjust the weight of their guns, carefully organising their bandoliers over their shoulder; First Sergeant Masters jogs back and forth, pausing at each room to ask, “Ammo, ammo, has everyone got enough ammo?”

Castiel drops into a crouch, tucked against a shrapnel-slivered wall towards the centre of the company's street. He tugs his rifle forwards in its sling, retrieves a new clip from his webbing and snaps it in, cranks back the cocking handle. He holds it loose, but ready, in his shoulder. He thumbs distractedly over the safety catch.

Aside from some last minute adjustment, some clanking of metal and some clumsy, half-asleep reloading of weapons, Baker Company is silent now. Overhead, the flare fizzes and splutters. Its red light comes dancing through the trees, glinting off metal, bathing every room in light as though in blood. Castiel breathes, slow and careful.

Time ticks by in agonising silence. Castiel only moves to watch the hands of his watch creep through five minutes, through ten, towards fifteen. The flare is weakening in the night sky, fading gradually until the shadows lengthen and the darkness comes slowly pressing back in.

Castiel has an itch of impatience under his skin. His men can take a straight fight, even now, even tired and low on rations. This waiting, on the other hand, is excruciating. As Castiel stays frozen, crouching until his knees lock and his toes ache and his calves burn, his brain flits back to every other time they've been stood-to since England, the way that Inias would worry that the Germans were never going to attack, that they were just going to keep them up all night to burn out morale until they made some offensive in the morning. Castiel's hand bounces agitatedly against his thigh.

He hauls himself up onto his feet, knees popping – Christ, when did that start happening? He feels old – and he sets off quietly down the

line. He stays low, rifle in his shoulder, and he scans through each window – alley one, clear, alley two, clear, alley three, clear; the traps set up along entry points remain undetonated; no glint of metal down the end of the street where enemy troops would be funnelled into their line of sight; something moving at their four o'clock, two-hundred yards, which turns out to be a gate banging in the wind. The night is dark again now.

On his way through two-platoon, he accidentally kicks a chunk of rubble, and a jumpy replacement jolts nervously at his position by the open window. “Thunder--”

“Flash,” Castiel says quietly. “Easy, Private. They'll be coming at us from the front.”

The replacement settles, breathing heavy, and Castiel continues on his way. He turns to go upstairs, climbing the steps two at a time, and he walks the length of the line upstairs. He checks that everyone knows their arcs of fire, that no-one has seen everything. Sergeant Brady adjusts the dials on his mortar-tripod; a replacement whose name Castiel has forgotten is carefully arranging his bangalore torpedoes where they lie on the floor.

Everything has gone dark again, and Castiel can't stop his heart from racing. He can hear his pulse, fast and panicked, inside his skull; he forces himself to breathe steady. Keep it together.

As he walks, he makes a rash decision. Morale is low enough already; they can't risk the men being sleep-deprived and unable to think rationally in the days to come. Castiel isn't dealing with this psychological warfare, awake until the small hours of the morning with wondering whether this is a threat or a bluff or a double-bluff. He isn't doing that.

Castiel digs in his webbing until he finds what he is looking for – his flare gun. He pulls it out, loads a flare into the chamber, and clicks the hammer back. He walks quickly along the top floor of the row of buildings, right to the end, where German artillery had punched a gaping hole in the corner of the building. Half the floor is gone, revealing a clean drop down into the first storey, and the roof is torn clean open. Castiel stands, and he points the flare gun directly up overhead, and he fires.

The flare explodes into the sky, painfully bright, smoke twisting behind it as it climbs higher and higher. Castiel lowers the gun and he watches it go, and then, behind him, a familiar voice says, “You know, sir, I think there might be a couple Krauts down towards Switzerland who don't know we're here yet.” Dean muffles a yawn. “Maybe we should put something on the radio. Just to make sure.”

Castiel doesn't look over at him. “They already know we're here,” he says. “If they're going to attack us, I'd rather get it over with.”

Dean makes a dismissive noise. “I mean, I'd rather they just didn't attack us, but sure.”

“That's out of my control,” Castiel says, and it tightens in his throat, because there it is, the thing that scares him most. They have been on the offensive for so long that it is deeply unsettling to him to be taking defensive positions, warding off counter-attacks every day and pushing back to keep the territory they have gained. He doesn't get to call the shots anymore. He just has to prepare his men for the inevitable, and try to be ready for when the fighting comes. He exhales, long and slow, and he lifts his flare gun, gestures loosely with it. “This isn't.”

Dean is quiet, and Castiel looks out over the street, the intersection at the bottom of the hill, the hollowed-out Sherman tank dead in the road, the scattered sandbags, the blood glittering dully under the flare's harsh red light.

Castiel glances back at Dean over his shoulder. He sits in the back corner of the room, leaning against the side of an old desk, one knee pulled up in front of him, the other leg sprawled out inelegantly. Castiel notes, almost distractedly, the way that Dean has his equipment arranged around him – with the appearance of carelessness, everything dumped on the floor, but not quite; straps and handles all upright, ready to be grabbed; laid out in order of priority.

Sometimes Castiel is so used to Dean that he forgets how good he is at his job. The light of the flare has cast him all in wavering pink, highlighting the line of his nose, the curve of his cheek. Castiel says, “Where are the others?”

Dean raises his eyebrows. “Ted and Nolan? We're spread out between platoons. No use losing three medics in one hit, right?”

Castiel nods. “Good idea.”

“I'm staying with four-platoon for now, but when they got stood to, I figured I'm most useful if I keep outta the way.”

Castiel tilts his head over. “That's almost always true.”

“Ha-ha.”

Castiel wants to smile, but he doesn't. He looks back out at the road.

He needs to keep scanning for the enemy's approach, but there is nothing so far. If he stares straight ahead and lets his eyes become

unfocused, he can faintly see movement flickering in his peripheral vision – but then again, recently, that isn't so unusual. It's been a while since he slept. Sometimes there are shadows at the edge of his sight; sometimes there are bright flashes, as of white phosphorus, when he closes his eyes. One of the benefits of the flare is that it glints hot and red off metal; it'll pick out enemy weaponry as soon as it comes into view.

“Lieutenant Novak, sir,” Dean says, and Castiel looks over straight away, unsettled.

It's the most respectful he's ever heard Dean, and paired with the quiet voice, so that he's almost inaudible even to Castiel, only five feet away – it makes Castiel nervous. “What?”

Dean doesn't immediately answer. He just looks back at Castiel, his expression serious and almost lost, and Castiel knows this is not a professional conversation. He steps in closer.

Castiel starts, “Winchester--”

“I gotta ask you something, but I'm pretty sure you're not gonna like it,” Dean says. His hands twist together in his lap, rubbing dirt distractedly from his thumbnail. “So if you don't wanna talk about it, you just tell me, okay?”

Dean is giving Castiel a way out of this conversation. He is silent for a moment, but his gaze is steady, and Castiel realises before Dean opens his mouth that this is going to hurt.

“It's just,” Dean starts, and then breaks off. “Sir, why are you carrying around a piece of paper that just says *Lieutenant Wallace* on it?”

Castiel had braced himself for it, but it still catches him off-guard. He stares at the floor past Dean's boots until his eyes lose focus and everything is blurring together, rubble and concrete and rucked-up carpeting into a tangled dark confusion. He breathes, in and out, and he pulls the words up past this thick, choking heaviness in his chest.

When he speaks, his voice is flat, quiet. “I haven't written the letter yet.”

Dean frowns. “What letter?” Then, understanding flickers gradually across his face. “The letter home?”

Castiel doesn't answer. He doesn't look at him.

Dean lets out a long breath. “So his family doesn't even know yet.”

There is judgement there in Dean's tone, even as he tries to hide it. It doesn't make Castiel feel worse, exactly; he already knows the extent to which this is severely fucked up. “No,” he says, toneless. “They don't know yet.” And then, because he feels the need to justify himself: “I can't do it.”

Dean is silent. If he had flared up and started in on Castiel with *how could you? You can't keep this from them, it's cruel, it's irresponsible* – then Castiel might have been able to fight back. He could've let himself get angry and argue back, but as it is, Dean says nothing, and Castiel draws in a slow, shaky breath.

He says, “I'm supposed to write this calm, professional letter – this cold letter – to a woman I've known since I was nine years old.” He can't make himself look at Dean. “I knew her better than I knew my

own mother. And I'm supposed to give her all the same old bullshit I give to the families of every other man that gets hit over here – *dear Mrs. Wallace, it is my deepest regrets that I write to inform you of the death of your son in combat, Second Lieutena--*" Castiel's voice cracks. "I can't do it."

He doesn't want to say anymore. The knowledge that Eleanor Wallace is sitting at home in Bedford, oblivious, curls in his gut and makes nausea rise in his throat, but he can't. She has known Castiel almost all his life; she'll see his name at the bottom of the letter – that is, if she doesn't immediately recognise his handwriting – and she'll know that he failed. That he didn't protect him, like he was supposed to.

There is no room in the letter for anything personal, no room to say, *Eleanor, I'm so fucking sorry. I did everything I could, I'm sorry, I did my best, I tried--* Castiel's vision is blurring. He clenches his jaw tight, realising that he is dangerously close to crying, and he swallows hard. He exhales slowly through his nose to relieve the pressure of his tightening throat. It doesn't help.

"Cas," Dean says, and his voice is sharp. Castiel lifts his eyes to meet him, and finds in Dean a tightly restrained anger. He speaks slowly, his voice quiet and calm, but there is something shaking underneath. Overhead, the red glow of the flare is wavering, a dimly flickering pulse that throws shadows. "At this point, you gotta know I'm with you whatever – but that's some fucking bullshit."

It's not what Castiel was expecting to hear from him. He didn't know what he was expecting, but the way that Dean rails up against him, his expression somewhere between pity and fury, feels as though it cuts Castiel's knees out from underneath him.

"She'll understand, okay?" Dean goes on. "You're company commanding officer – you don't exactly a whole lot of leeway for personal connections."

Castiel isn't sure whether he's just imagining the bitterness in that.

“She'll get it. But you know what she won't get? You know what *I* don't get?” Dean says angrily. “That it took you a month, a whole goddamn month, to find the fucking balls to be honest with her.”

Castiel's voice is strangled by something clenching painfully within his chest. “Dean—”

Dean sits forwards, elbow propped on his knee. “Listen to me. You didn't fail Inias at Brest. You did your best in shitty, shitty, fucking goddamn awful circumstances, and you were never gonna succeed. Injuries that bad – come on, he was never gonna make it. But that piece of paper--” Dean says, and he jabs a sharp, accusatory finger in Castiel's direction, forcefully enough that Castiel flinches back, “--the fact his fucking mother still doesn't know her son is dead – that is failing him.” Dean scrubs a hand down over his face. “Fucking – Jesus.” He sits up straight then, hand falling away to sit limply in his lap, and he stares at Castiel, incredulous. “If I got shot tomorrow, would you tell Sam? Or would you sit on that, too?”

Fear rolls coldly in Castiel's gut; instinctively, anger flares in response. “You're not going to get shot tomorrow,” he snaps, before he can reminds himself that they're stood-to; they need to keep their voices down.

Dean stares him down, challenging, and Castiel doesn't know how the hell Dean always manages to have the higher ground, even when he's sitting on the goddamn floor. When he speaks, his voice is hard. “How the fuck do you know?”

Castiel doesn't have an answer for him. He has this terror roiling

within him at the idea that there is no-one he can keep safe. He feels as though he is bleeding himself dry and worked to the bone to take care of these men, and still, a stray bullet or chunk of shrapnel could take that all away. For a moment, he wishes he could explain – that he feels as though he is constantly losing, that he doesn't want to lose the last link he has to Inias as well – and then he realises that there is nothing to explain, except more excuses. Castiel is tired of trying to be right all the time, especially when he isn't.

“You don't wanna write it, that's fine,” Dean says, his voice gentler now, but not without its harsh edge, “but you pass it on to someone who does.”

Castiel shakes his head. “No, absolutely not,” he says immediately. “If she has to hear this at all, she'll hear it from me. I would never dream of letting her get this news from anyone else.”

The flare overhead fizzes, splutters, and begins to fade, red through pink until the light is no more than a dim and colourless flickering. It picks out the shadows under Dean's eyes. He looks as exhausted as Castiel feels.

“Then you need to tell her.”

Castiel swallows. “Alright,” he says, at last, quiet and small. “I will.” He hesitates, uncertain. “Thank you.”

Dean's gaze drops back to his hands. “Yeah. Sure thing, sir.”

“And you - you're--”

“Fine,” Dean replies, in a tone that indicates precisely the opposite. He turns his hands over, rubs at his thumbnail again.

Castiel aches to be near to him, to ignore the waiting threat of a dimming flare and to disregard the whole war in favour of settling down quietly beside him. He wants to lace their fingers together, to put his head on Dean's shoulders and just be silent. It scares Castiel to death, and but this isn't the time or place to say that, even if he could find the words to say how he feels. Castiel thinks, if he could just kiss Dean, he could be a great deal braver.

“Thank you,” Castiel says again, at a loss of what else to say. The flare is at last extinguished above them, the street and the sky falling again into darkness, and Castiel knows that he needs to move back along the line. He can't stay here with Dean forever.

He turns away, and he clenches the flare gun tight at his side as he heads back down the length of the building. For one second, he holds the gun up and looks at it, and then he stows it back into his webbing. He had hoped to send out some kind of signal – *here we are, come on and get it over with* – but it doesn't seem to have worked.

Heads turn as Castiel walks, NCOs and replacements alike sneaking glances away from their arcs of fire in order to judge whether they might be allowed to stand down soon. After all, it's late, and they are tired, and there is no telling when – if ever – the enemy will show themselves to counter-attack.

Castiel pretends not to see them, and he doesn't give the order.

21st October, 1944

Castiel presses himself back into the peeling wallpaper, hands tight on

his rifle, and he holds his breath. From his position, he has a narrow view through the open window of the hotel in which three squads of Baker Company are waiting in silence. The rest of the men are spread out, tucked into other positions of cover along this street, and they are waiting for his signal: two- and three-platoon at windows along this side of the street, four-platoon waiting to move up to the top of the street and catch them in enfilade, one-platoon waiting to flank down the back street. Castiel feel the others' eyes on him as he peers through.

The 116th pushed into Aachen; the Germans pushed back. The last few days have been chaotic, and there have been times where it's unclear where the front line lies, whether they're holding their objective and on their way to success, or whether the line is flexing around them and they're shortly to be surrounded. It wouldn't surprise Castiel; he's heard that it's happened to other companies already. It could happen to any of them.

He tilts up onto the balls of his feet, boots creaking, and he looks through, down the street. Nothing. He adjusts his grip on his M1, and the dull squeak of his sweaty fingers on the wood seems impossibly loud to him. All down the line, men are breathing shallow, silent.

Castiel breathes through his teeth, slow and steady, and as he sits on his heels, waiting for the sound of the Tiger rolling down the street, or for some unlucky German rifleman to pass his window. They got the intelligence at around oh-five-fifty; they had less than an hour to act. Now they wait.

They wait, and Castiel holds his breath, perfectly silent, and then slowly he realises that he can hear something. A high, choking noise, broken up by shaky breathing.

At first Castiel thinks someone has been hurt without his realisation, that what he can hear is someone slowly bleeding out – but then he realises. Someone is crying.

Castiel turns his head.“What the fuck is that?” he hisses.

The men of two-platoon closest to him stare blankly back, bewildered, and then Castiel's gaze moves further down, towards First Sergeant Masters. For a moment, Mark looks similarly confused, and then he realises. “Shit.” He drops his chin into his chest with a sigh. “Yeah, that's Private Rosen. He's fine, he's just--”

“Get him quiet, now,” Castiel interrupts, voice low. “We cannot have him doing this right now.”

“Sir, he's fine, he's just scared—”

“First Sergeant, if one person in this company loses it, they all will, and I am not having my company deteriorate because one man is scared,” Castiel says sharply. “So fucking deal with it.”

Masters stares at him. There is the distant sound of movement down the street.

“Now!”

“Yes, sir,” Masters says, and he gets up and heads off down the line.

Castiel lets his breath out in a sharp burst, steadying. He doesn't have the space in his brain to worry about anything extraneous, and right now, Private Rosen is extraneous. He turns back to the window, and he doesn't think about the steady but sure decline in morale in his company, and he waits.

Fifty tonnes of heavy armour is making its slow way towards them, along with one half-strength German rifle company, and Castiel has at his disposal one single infantry company with limited anti-tank weaponry. The situation is hardly ideal, but they're in Baker's sector of defence now. They aren't getting any further.

The ground is starting to rumble. Sawdust shakes loose from the ceiling and falls in slow flakes.

Castiel lifts his head to peer through what little view he is afforded through the narrow window. Nothing yet. He turns to look for Lieutenant Shurley, who holds up three fingers. Three hundred yards. Shurley twists, glances back down the line, to where Hester is passing the information up, and then turns back. His gestures are somewhat loose and unclear, but Castiel understands – tank, one; platoon, three; riflemen, gunner, light artillery. Castiel swallows.

The rumbling of tank treads over rubble grows louder. The men crouched in the shadows don't move except to flinch against the wall. Down the row, Sergeant Harvelle's hands are clenching and unclenching on the barrel of his Thompson.

Castiel watches as Shurley twists back this way, hand raised. Two-hundred yards.

Castiel breathes. On his signal, he reminds himself – and then, ridiculously, he weighs the potential outcome of not giving the signal. Hiding here, letting the tank pass, keeping all his men alive. He only entertains the idea for a moment, and then it passes. He flexes his hand on his rifle, checks that the safety catch is snapped off, checks that his ammunition clip is secure. He tucks the sling behind his elbow, and carefully, silently, eases himself into a standing position. He keeps his back to the wall, and he doesn't move except to tilt his head over to look at Shurley. One-hundred yards.

Long moments pass in shivering silence. They are barely breathing.

Castiel hopes that Private Tran is paying attention.

Shurley lifts his hand. Fifty yards.

Castiel turns. Pulls his rifle up into his shoulder, points it through the window, tilted up into empty air, and he fires.

There is a split-second when nothing happens, and Castiel thinks, *fuck, fuck* – and then there is a loud bang, and there is faint white smoke, and someone is shouting in German, and everything is thrown immediately into chaos. Castiel tilts his head towards the stairs and he yells, “Again!”

In the street, the German soldiers spill frantically left and right in search of cover, and then there is a series of short, sharp bangs, and someone is screaming. The mines along the far side of the street are working, then. Castiel snaps the safety on his rifle and he runs.

“Concino, radio it in to Virgil – bring them around now!” he yells as he comes down the line. “Hester, how's it looking?”

“Tiger still mobile, turret turning--”

Castiel sprints for the stairs, takes them two at a time. Behind him, two- and three-platoon fire fast and steady, tucked into cover at windows and doors. Machine-gun fire rattles all through the building, used rounds clattering onto the uneven floorboards with a sound like

spilled pennies. Castiel's rifle bounces against his side, iron-sight catching him painfully in the hip, and then he rounds the corner at the top of the stairs and he runs for where Private Mulcahy is fumbling with the bazooka propped on Kevin Tran's shoulder.

“Again, Tran, now!” Castiel yells at him, and he comes running so fast that he has to skid to a halt – he can feel a muscle pull in his calf – and then he drops heavily to one knee beside him, flinching back into the cover of a crumbling wall as bullets crack close to his head.

“Any day now, Pete,” Tran says, voice high and near-hysterically singsong, as he balances the bazooka on his shoulder, tilted back while Mulcahy struggles with the arming pin.

“I'm trying, I'm trying--”

Castiel looks down at the Tiger, and his breath sticks in his throat. He's never been this close to an enemy tank before. At forty yards, it fills half the street, and it's past their position now, with a smouldering hole in the back plate where the armour is thin, but it's not enough – and the turret has stopped turning. It has started to slowly lift towards their position.

“Come on, come on, come on,” Castiel says. He can hear his pulse inside his skull.

“I swear to fucking God, Mulcahy--”

“Alright, I got it--”

“Now!” Castiel shouts, and Tran fires.

It barely recoils, but the sound is near-deafening. Castiel cringes back, but quickly gets back up to assess the damage – a cleaner hole in the back plate, smoking furiously, but still no explosion – and then the Tiger's gunners are firing on them again.

Castiel ducks back, throwing an arm up over his face as bullets crack off the brickwork and throw dust into his eyes. He slaps Mulcahy's arm with his free hand. “Again!” He tilts back towards the stairs, takes a deep breath, and yells as loud as he can. “Clear out, clear out, everybody move!”

Mulcahy digs in his bag for another rocket, and Castiel tries to remember how to breathe. He has faith in his men - they can win against this German infantry company, he knows it – but if they can't get rid of this tank, they're fucked. The turret is rising.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Tran says. His shoulder is shaking beneath the bazooka. “We gotta get outta here. We gotta fucking move, we can't--”

“Hold still, private,” Castiel mutters. “Easy, just a second longer--”

Mulcahy fumbles with the rocket and nearly drops it.

Castiel pushes past him and snatches it up. He gets onto one knee, snaps the tail latch up, nudges the warhead in, tail latch down--

“Sir, we're gonna fuckin' die,” Tran announces.

“Hold fucking still,” Castiel snaps. He pulls the arming pin. He raises

the tail latch again, slides the rest of the rocket home, pushes the latch down to engage the fins – “Now!”

Tran fires, and the turret grinds to a standstill, and Castiel grabs a handful of the back of Mulcahy's combat jacket to haul him violently towards the stairs, and they scramble over each other. The Tiger fires.

Everything is sound and smoke, Castiel's ears ringing, and then he picks himself up – from halfway down the stairs, he notes with some detached interest, his palms scraped bloody – and he grabs Private Tran again. He is shaken, but intact; Mulcahy has blood pouring down from the side of his jaw, and his arm looks useless at his side, bent all wrong. “Go!” Castiel shouts, his hearing so shot that he can't hear his own voice, and he pushes at them as they stagger half-blind down the rest of the stairs.

There is a hole the size of a locomotive smashed through the side of the house, exposing the flinty grey of an overcast sky, white and red smoking twisting loosely upwards – but more importantly, there are flames licking up out of the Tiger, and a German soldier is screaming as he desperately claws his way out.

Castiel pulls his rifle up into his shoulder. For a moment, he is wobbly, his legs shaky underneath after the shell hit, and then he holds his breath, pulls his body tighter. He shoots the German through the nose.

As his hearing returns, he can faintly hear the crash of mortars zeroed on the street, kicking up black smoke and shaking the foundations of the buildings around them, and German is being shouted from what feels like all sides. Enemy riflemen are advancing on their position, laying down rapid fire with a kind of desperation that makes them dangerous, while Baker men flinch down into cover. They have retreated back into what remains of their building once the tank blew, and they keep their positions at the windows, firing and firing. Down the long hallway that they have made between all the houses, there

are cries for ammunition, machine-gun rounds scattering wildly, and then First Sergeant Masters comes running along the line, bent low, with arms full of jangling bandoliers.

“Keep on them, don't let them through!” Castiel shouts. “Shurley, status?”

Shurley is dirt-smeared, his face almost unrecognisable. “Looking good, lieutenant!” he calls back, but whatever else he says, Castiel doesn't hear, because just behind him, one of the new replacements lifts his head too high over the windowsill and takes two bullets to his forehead. The wallpaper behind him is sprayed with a fine red mist, and then suddenly Zeddmore is in Castiel's face, radio mouth-piece in hand.

“Sir, four-platoon is pulling back their position in alternating bounds to keep out of range,” Zeddmore says, his voice cracking as he tries to be heard over the noise of the firefight. “How do you respond?”

“Fine, that's fine, as long as they stay on them,” Castiel says, and he keeps moving, leaving Zedmore and Lieutenant Shurley behind.

He runs up the line to check on three-platoon, shouting commands and encouragement and ducking out of view of the German riflemen trying to push up on their position, and then he sees Dean.

He loses what he was saying, and the next thing out of his mouth is loud and panicked: “Winchester--”

Dean looks up and meets his eyes, and there is a strange moment when it seems as though Dean doesn't recognise him. Castiel tells himself *walking wounded, walking wounded*, but it doesn't do anything to dissipate the terror that tightens in his chest – Dean without a

helmet, Dean with too much blood all over his face. Somehow Castiel has his hands fisted into the front of Dean's combat jacket, and he hauls him roughly away from the windows and holds him still.

Automatically, Dean says, “I'm fine. It doesn't hurt.”

“What the fuck did you do?” Castiel yells over the deafening noise of mortars and gunfire. He can't think what else to say, and he still has one hand in Dean's jacket, the other going instinctively to Dean's face, thumb rubbing carefully over Dean's cheek. He can't stop himself. “What the fuck--”

“I'm fine,” Dean says again, even though the evidence against that point is the three-inch shrapnel wound from his eyebrow to his hairline, thick and dark and angry, his face stained with blood. He has a small nick along the side of his neck, spilling red over the collar of his combats. “I swear, sir--”

“What happened to your helmet?” Castiel demands.

Dean's eyes stay on Castiel's. In this thin light, they look more grey than green. “Fell off.”

Castiel's fingers are tight on Dean's jaw, on the side of his head. “You weren't wearing your chin-strap,” Castiel summarises bluntly. “You weren't using your helmet as it was fucking designed, and so you were injured in the exact way that the helmet was designed to prevent, because you just--”

“Sir,” Dean interrupts. He has his fingers curled around Castiel's wrist. “I'm fine.”

“You're not fine, you're going to need stitches,” Castiel snaps.

“Then I'll get stitches.” Dean tries to pull away; Castiel won't let him. “Hey. Sir. *Hey.*” Dean catches Castiel's eye, and holds him there. He has blood in his eyelashes. “I'm fine.”

Castiel looks at him. He is close enough that he can smell the smoke and ash on Dean's skin, and there are small scuffs on the apple of his cheek where his head must have hit the concrete. The look in his eyes is quiet and sincere, and his fingers are tight, steady, on Castiel's wrist. Castiel says, “You--”

Dean swallows, and he says, “Cas.”

“You're alright,” Castiel says. Something is pulling tight inside his chest, and he doesn't know how to stop himself from being afraid. Dean is walking wounded – low priority. They have to get out of this firefight first, and for that they need Dean. Castiel has to get back to his command, too. Distantly, he can hear fire and shouting behind him, and he knows that he needs to move. He doesn't. There is a long moment where he remains crouched in front of Dean, cradling his head in two hands, and he holds his breath. “You're alright.”

Dean nods wordlessly. Then, finally, he pulls away from Castiel's hands. He stands up, but as he goes, his hand slips down from Castiel's wrist to his hand, brushing over Castiel's fingers, and then he is gone. He runs away down the line, musette bag jostling at his side, and he disappears amongst the smoke in search of someone injured.

Castiel takes a deep breath, and he keeps on moving down the line.

22 nd October, 1944

It started raining around oh-eight-hundred hours, and it hasn't let up since. It sloshes off their helmet, slants hard into their eyes, but Castiel doesn't care. The city is won.

“Mail here for Montgomery!” First Sergeant Masters comes striding through, a handful of crumpled letters in one hand that he rifles through as he walks. “Montgomery, come and get your mail! Letter here for Stepp, one here for Winchester – come and get your mail, boys.”

Castiel doesn't bother paying attention for his name. He replied to his cousin in Bismarck after Brest, letting them know that he would be hanging onto his mother's house and would arrange to have his wages sent back to Bismarck to help pay for it; since then he's heard nothing. He supposes that they won't be terribly interested once they get what they're after. It isn't as though they're close.

Right now, he doesn't care much either way. Word came late last night that Hotel Quellenhof had been taken, and after that it was just a matter of keeping the perimeter secure from any further counter-attacks. Thankfully, the Germans seem to have finally realised when they are beaten, and Baker's sector has been quiet.

Now they are being drawn back, along with the rest of the 2nd Battalion, and word from the S-4 is that it won't be long before they are pulled out of the 30th Division and returned to their rightful place within the 29th. If they're lucky, they might even get some time off at some point along the way. Castiel is still bone-tired, aching in his back and his bad shoulder and his bruised knee, but he feels better than he has in a long time.

Men come dragging themselves out into the rain to retrieve their mail,

snatching greedily for word from wives and girlfriends and mothers; others stand bunched in small circles under whatever shelter they can find, mess tins of lukewarm field rations clutched in their hands. Up at the top of the street, Castiel can see Concino and Hough eagerly climbing up onto a Sherman to take a look inside, while a grubby Staff Sergeant from the 108th looks on in amusement. There are supply officers running crates back and forth between houses, heads ducked low and shoulders pulled up high, to protect themselves from the rain. Two soldiers from Dog Company peel back their bandages to compare shrapnel wounds. Sergeant Harvelle is loudly telling a joke about two blondes and a train conductor; further down, Miller gripes about some injustice done to him during the defence of Aachen.

"--keeps telling everyone he took out that pillbox on his own, but he didn't! It was him, me, Jack, and Edgar--"

"Who the hell is Edgar?" Private Turner interrupts, his voice loud and incredulous, rising above all the rest of the noise amongst the 2nd Battalion, as Castiel weaves his way through in search of battalion staff.

"One of the greens from three-platoon. You've seen him. Skinny kid, never shaved."

Calahee laughs darkly. "Oh, sure, that narrows it down."

A cluster of men from two-platoon are cleaning their weapons as they wait to be resupplied; they hand the same two canisters of oil back and forth amongst a dozen of them. Across the road, Lieutenant Alistair can be seen through one of the broken window, leaning back against the sill as he flips through a small notebook, squinting through the thin, pale blue light of the early morning, and further along, coming down towards Castiel from the battalion's easternmost sentry point, is none other than Gabriel.

He smiles as he catches sight of Castiel and slows down long enough to slap a hand to his shoulder. “Hey, what's this I hear about you and a Tiger?”

Castiel turns as he walks to keep facing Gabriel, taking slow steps backwards. “I don't like to brag,” he says.

“Aha! So there's something to brag about.”

Castiel tips his head over. “Well, we did only have one anti-tank weapon, but...”

Gabriel laughs. “But you don't like to brag,” he calls back over his shoulder, and Castiel smiles.

He continues to move through the company in its various states of disarray: some eating, some chatting loudly and at length about whatever news the latest *29 Let's Go!* had brought; some fighting, some glad not to. Overhead, there is a crooked V of birds: arrowhead formation, Castiel thinks. Too narrowly spaced. One machine-gun burst could take out the entire left flank.

Then, as Castiel walks, he catches Dean's voice drifting across from one of the platoon CPs.

“--so drink a lot of water, okay, and you need to rest. You on sentry tonight?”

Castiel looks over to find Dean, plus one of the newer replacements that they picked up this side of Normandy, standing together out of the rain. The kid nods his head, and then stifles a barking cough with

the back of his hand.

“Well, don't be. You speak to Lieutenant Novak – actually, no. Speak to your platoon sergeant first, and then I'll tell Novak--”

“Tell me what?” Castiel asks.

Dean lifts his head. Something like a smile starts up on his face, slow and small. “Private Rivett is going to request rearranging sentry rotas so he can get a good night's sleep,” he says, and he doesn't take his eyes off Castiel once as he approaches. “I think he might have bronchitis.”

Castiel tilts his head over. “I don't see why that shouldn't be possible.” He turns to Rivett. “How are you feeling?”

“I'm fine,” Rivett says, in a hoarse, barely audible voice that is accompanied by a deep rattling in his lungs. “Just a little blocked up, is all.”

He's not fine, that much is apparent. More than a few of the men have been coming down ill since the weather turned. Even Castiel has a slightly stuffy nose and a tickle in the back of his throat, but what's important is ensuring that it doesn't get any worse for the men who are really suffering. “That should be alright,” he says. “Don't worry about sentry tonight. I'll get someone from tomorrow's rota to cover you, but then you'll need to take their shift tomorrow night. Is that clear?”

Rivett nods. “That sounds great, thank you, sir.”

“Alright, I'll – don't salute,” Castiel says before Dean can, as the kid's hand lifts halfway towards his head. “Don't. I'll ensure that someone passes the new rota on to you before your shift tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. Thank you.” Rivett bows his head – Castiel supposes it's the closest approximation the kid can make to a salute without actually doing it – and then glances nervously between them. “So, uh. Can I go, or--”

“You're dismissed,” Castiel says.

Rivett bows again, and then he disappears, and Dean and Castiel are left looking at each other.

To say that Dean could do with some hot water and soap would be an understatement. His skin is darkly discoloured by mud and brick-dust, his hair flat against his skull with grease, and while he has wiped the worst of the blood from his face, there is still dried blood clinging to his eyebrows and hairline, and his forehead is stained by it. He has six stitches in his head, and Castiel still wants to kiss him.

“You look like shit,” Castiel says.

Dean's smile widens. “Thank you, sir.”

“How's your head?”

Dean rocks back on his heels and lets out a low whistle. “Hurts like a motherfucker. Wearing a helmet is a bitch--”

“It wouldn't have happened if you'd been wearing your helmet in the first place,” Castiel points out.

“--but,” Dean goes on, talking right over Castiel, “I figure I'm gonna look real tough when it heals up. Distinguished.”

“I'm sure.”

Dean shrugs, light and easy. “So it's not all bad.”

Castiel nods, and he finds himself hesitating. They've been so occupied with taking and defending Aachen that he and Dean haven't had a great deal of time to talk to each other beyond the scope of Castiel yelling for a medic as the bullets fly, and now that things are settling to a temporary reprieve, Castiel is conscious of everything still between them. They are better now, able to speak easily and without awkwardness, and that they make a good team is obvious – but they can't pretend everything is normal. Not least because Castiel isn't sure that their relationship was ever normal.

As Castiel pauses in uncertainty, the conversation falls into a lull, and Dean doesn't fill it. He just looks at Castiel, presumably entertaining the same train of thought, and Castiel doesn't know where to start.

However, before Castiel can find the words, First Sergeant Masters comes up alongside them, rifling through a heap of crumpled envelopes, and he announces, “Winchester, I got mail here for you.”

“Shit, thanks, Mark.” Dean takes the letter and rips the top corner, tucks a fingertip into the opening and tears it impatiently open. He leaves grubby fingerprints on the clean envelope, stains of blood and dirt.

Masters walks away, but the bubble has already burst, and Castiel knows that when a letter turns up from Sam, there will be a half hour or so in which Dean will be only thirty percent present, at best. The rest of the world stops existing.

Castiel hovers momentarily, unsure as to whether he should try anyway, but Dean is completely engrossed in the letter already, and so Castiel takes his cue to leave.

“Well. I'll leave you to your mail,” he says awkwardly, and he takes a step backwards. Then, without thinking, he says, “Say hello to Sam for me.”

Dean lifts his head, and just for a second, the letter in his hands is forgotten as he stares at Castiel. A frown pulls down between his eyebrows, and he studies Castiel as though in disbelief. “Really?”

Castiel shifts, uncomfortable. He regrets having said as much now; there's no reason for him to try to push any further into Dean's life already. They're not boyfriend and girlfriend. He doesn't need any kind of understanding with the most important person in Dean's life. “Yes. Of course, you don't have to. I merely meant--”

“No, it's okay, I'll – yeah.” Dean is unconsciously holding the letter close to his chest. He nods. “Sure.”

There is heat rising on Castiel's jaw, and Dean is still looking at him, his expression turned soft. Castiel clears his throat and looks anywhere else. “Alright. Thank you, then. I'll see you later.”

Dean says, “See you,” and his voice is quiet. Castiel doesn't look at

him, but he can still feel Dean's eyes on him as he makes his excuses and leaves.

25th October, 1944

Castiel runs.

Ahead of him, dawn is rising pale and grey over the rooftops of Eygelshoven, and the morning is bathed in a hazy light that bleaches the colour from everything. Castiel doesn't have his watch, but it should be coming up to oh-six-hundred now. Almost reveille. He inhales slowly through his nose to fight the breathlessness he can feel hotly inside his chest, and he keeps going. He wants to make an even eight miles.

He focuses on the sound of his boots hitting the gravel, keeping the pace steady, and he breathes, in and out. He can feel his muscles aching already, and there is that small, flickering part of him that wants to stop and stretch and get his breath back, but he ignores it. Yesterday he ran six miles in the interest of not pushing himself too hard, and when the time came that evening to return to his barracks, he was still not tired enough to be able to sleep. He has to go further.

Since they were pulled back to a new Dutch assembly area just outside Kerkrade, the 2nd Battalion have been delighted to have some time to regroup. There's no telling how much time they'll get off the front line, but they're back with the 29th Infantry now for further training, and the 175th and 115th have been put on reserve in their place.

From what Castiel hears in battalion briefings, most attention is being diverted to taking the Rur dam, but the Allied forces are being held up by German defences along the Hürtgen Forest, so it's likely that they could be here for a while. There are even rumours of a recreation facility up north that some lucky soldiers are being allowed to visit for

the weekend, so the majority has been getting overexcited about the prospect of movie theatres and dance halls, and meanwhile Castiel has to run miles and miles every morning to keep his hands from shaking.

Instinct beats in Castiel's chest as he runs, telling him to go faster, faster, he won't outrun the gunfire at this speed – and he breathes, slow and steady, and suppresses it. There is no gunfire. He is running fast enough.

By the time Castiel approaches the sentry outpost of Eygelshoven, the sun is climbing slowly higher into the sky, a cold, unclear white that makes the sky look washed out, and soldiers are already spilling out of houses in search of breakfast. Castiel heads towards the men on sentry, and as he slows down, steps falling heavy, he notices hat there is someone stood on the corner, watching him. Major Campbell has a cigarette to his mouth, smoking right down to the butt.

Castiel unties the sleeves of his combat jacket where they're knotted around his waist and opens it up to show the sentries his division and regiment, as well as his officer insignia, and they let him through. Castiel heads towards Campbell.

Campbell takes the cigarette from his mouth. “Something chasing you I should know about?”

“No, sir,” Castiel says breathlessly, the eight miles finally catching up to him, and he takes deep gulps of air. He fights the urge to set his hands on his knees and double over while he catches his breath, and instead he stands up as straight as possible. He regrets now that he hasn't kept up the calisthenics with Baker as much as he should have in the past few months. They have been in near-constant combat, but quick sprints out of range of mortar fire aren't the same as keeping up their five-minute mile, and they need to be in better shape. Castiel certainly does. “Just thought I could use the air, sir.”

Campbell raises his eyebrows, but makes no comment. He goes on smoking his cigarette silently, but he studies Castiel over its smouldering end, and Castiel has the sense that Campbell might be giving him a chance to get his breath back. If so, it's a more generous sentiment expressed than Castiel has seen from him since the war began.

“How are your men?” Campbell asks. It's small-talk; as battalion S-3, Campbell's area of interest is strictly operational, and doesn't usually concern himself with the personnel aspects.

Castiel nods. “They're well, sir. Morale was low in Aachen, but since being pulled back there has been a notable improvement in spirits, although I believe they're dreading the return to calisthenics. We also have a few casualties due back from the hospital shortly, which should motivate them further.”

A small frown pulls down from Campbell's brow. “Why was morale so low in Aachen?”

Castiel stares at him, incredulous. He opens his mouth, and then realises he has no idea what to say. *Because we were alone out there, and there were pillboxes set up in civilian basements, and they were sending goddamn tanks after us, and we went six days on the front-line without being resupplied ammunition, and every fucking day felt like we were losing more men than the damage we were doing.* He takes a deep breath, and he says, “We suffered a few losses, sir. Our position was unstable.”

Campbell hums to himself thoughtfully, as though the concept is something he had never considered, but that he'll take Castiel's word for it. “Of course,” he says. “There was that suicide in Able Company – unfortunate. Still, you fared better, and Aachen was a success in the end.”

Castiel doesn't know that he necessarily considers not having members of his company kill themselves grounds for a competition, but he says nothing. In Würselen, Gabriel had one of his replacements blow out their own kneecap with a pistol so that he could go home. It's spreading.

“You've been doing well out there,” Campbell says eventually, and he takes the cigarette butt out of his mouth, flicks it away into the road. “All of the 2nd Battalion has, but you – I remember when I heard that we'd lost Captain Milton, and that you were to replace him.” Campbell shakes his head and lets out a slow breath. “I'll be honest, Novak, we had little faith in you.”

Castiel doesn't react. This isn't exactly news to him.

“You've done exceptionally well under the circumstances – being given command of Baker with so little warning or preparation, and you've performed capably – hell, admirably – in bringing those men through Normandy. You've continued to impress through Holland and now into Germany, and truthfully, I wouldn't be surprised if there was a promotion in your future. You intend to make a career of the military, don't you?”

Castiel lifts his chin higher, stands up straighter. He doesn't let the shock of the mention of a promotion break into his face, but internally, he can't help himself: *Captain Novak.* “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Good. You would continue to be an asset to our division, I don't doubt it.”

For a moment, Castiel doesn't know what to say. Pride swells inside Castiel's chest, and he forgets that he never wanted to be commander. Praise from Major Campbell is a rare thing, and it feels all the more hard-won for the fact that Castiel is fairly certain Campbell has hated

him since Omaha. “Thank you, sir.”

Campbell's head twitches slightly as though even Castiel's gratitude is in some way unpleasant to him. “Yes. You've heard of Brunssum, I trust?”

“No, sir.” Castiel frowns, and wonders why this new information isn't being reserved for an official battalion briefing with the rest of the company commanding officers. “Is that to be our new objective?”

“New objective – Jesus. No. It's just a recreation area, Lieutenant,” Campbell says, with a roll of his eyes. “I'm permitting a two-day retreat for the 2nd Battalion, back to the rear.”

Castiel blinks. “That's generous, sir,” he says. “Thank you. It'll be great for morale. I'll let the men know to apply immediately, and I'll stay with those who--”

“No applications,” Campbell says. “Everyone's going. The whole battalion. Including you.”

“Sir, I--”

“No exceptions. You boys need a rest, and according to General Bradley, you're all compelled to get one whether you like it or not.”

Castiel nods. He doesn't know that he wants more time off – more time to think, and to become increasingly conscious of his pervasive inability to relax – but it appears there isn't much he can do about it. “Yes, sir. When do we move?”

“Don't know yet.” Campbell gives a loose, non-committal shrug. “We'll have an official briefing on it as soon as we have the intelligence from division, but it should be soon.”

“Thank you, sir.” Castiel hesitates. “Was there anything else you wanted to discuss with me, sir?”

Campbell snorts derisively. “I barely wanted to discuss anything with you in the first place, Novak. I came out here for a smoke.”

“Of course. Sorry, sir,” Castiel says automatically, even as he considers that Campbell is the one who initiated this conversation. Now is not the time to be pedantic. “Permission to fall out, sir?”

Campbell gives a curt nod. “Granted.”

Castiel lifts his chin in lieu of coming to attention or saluting, since he's not in proper uniform, and then he turns and heads off down the road towards his barracks. He stretches out his tired muscles. He thinks, *Captain Novak,* and he bites back a smile.

29th October, 1944

Brunssum is beautiful.

It has its fair share of rubble and wreckage, as does every once-occupied city between Berlin and the sea, but to the men of Baker Company and the rest of the 2nd Battalion, it's as close to paradise as they're likely to come. They are billeted in civilian houses – no

crowded, stinking barracks – and the luxuries seem endless.

In the town centre, there are hot showers, with enough water for everyone; there is a movie theatre set up, and from what rumours Castiel hears in the mess hall, someone stole a poster of Lauren Bacall and renting it out to other soldiers in exchange for smokes – a barter that Castiel doesn't want to examine too closely. There's a dance hall with a live band, and bars selling mismatched alcohol from wherever they can find it; they have an expansive mess hall with hot meals, and there is a photography shop along the main street where a lot of the men have been posing for photographs to send home to their sweethearts and families. Castiel doesn't bother, but yesterday he saw Dean in the street fussing over his hair and trying to angle his garrison cap to conceal his head injury, insisting that *it'll worry Sammy, okay, he'll worry, I gotta hide it.*

Tonight, as Castiel reaches the mess hall serving station, the officers' line intersects with the line for the enlisted man, and he bumps into a handful of Baker men, who smile and greet him while they try to figure out the etiquette of who should go first – Castiel, by rank, or Corporal Lowell, by order of arrival.

“You first,” Castiel says, and he steps back to let Ash through, before following behind. “How are you doing?”

“You know me, sir, can't complain,” he says cheerily as he collects a tray. “My future's looking pretty damn bright at the moment. I got wind from Fox Company that the broads here are real, real friendly, so I'm optimistic.”

“Buddy, you're gonna need more than optimism,” Zeddmore announces from behind him.

Ash half-turns quickly and throws an obscene gesture at Zeddmore,

which Castiel decides to pretend not to have seen. “You thinking you gonna get yourself a nice girl at the dance, sir?” Ash asks when he turns back around.

Castiel shakes his head. “I'm not going to the dance,” he says, and then, “Thank you,” to the men on mess duty as he is handed a plateful of spaghetti and hot dogs. It looks watery, and the hot dogs look like they were made from old tires, but it's fresh and steaming, and Castiel's mouth waters.

“What do you mean?” Ash asks, incredulous, as he is served. “Sir, how come?”

Castiel tilts his head over. “Not my scene,” he says mildly.

“Then what is your scene, sir?” Bradbury chips in from further down the line, amid jostling from the men behind him.

Castiel smiles. “Anywhere my men aren't.”

“Oh!” Zeddmore exclaims, and he claps a melodramatic hand to his chest. “I'm hit – I'm hit.”

“You're breaking our hearts here, lieutenant.”

Castiel retrieves a glass of water from the end table and balances it on his tray. “I hate to disappoint, but unfortunately my only date tonight is my paperwork,” he says. “You have a good time, though. Pickle your livers, pretend to be sober on parade tomorrow – you know the drill.”

Ash breaks out laughing. “Yes, sir,” he says, and as Castiel heads away to the officers' mess, he can still their cackling and bickering from across the room.

He eats quickly, only having Alistair and an assortment of unfamiliar platoon-leaders from the rest of the battalion for company at his table, and then he excuses himself and makes his way out. He deposits his tray at the washing station, thanking the mess staff again, and then he heads out into the evening.

Overhead, sunset is splitting the sky, frothy grey cloud cover fractured by thin rays of light that burns pink through gold, and the windows of every building are cast in a hazy yellow light, as warm as the air is chill. Winter is advancing on them, and Castiel hunches his shoulders against the cold whip of wind that threatens to sweep his garrison cap off his head. His billet isn't far, at least.

He has been assigned a small, brick house on the outskirts of the town centre, where apparently an elderly couple used to live, but who have temporarily vacated the premises in favour of family in Switzerland, out of the way of the war. It consists of four rooms: a small sitting room downstairs with unseasonably squashy armchairs that Castiel tried once and never since; a kitchen through that back doorway, with a wash-room just off the side; up the rickety stairs is one small bedroom with a low ceiling and a heavy oak bed. Too small for sharing, thank goodness.

Castiel closes the door behind him, and stands for a moment on the worn mat. He jangles the key distractedly in his hand, and then pushes them into the pocket of his pants.

Captain Devereux sold the billet as being tiny but comfortable, but privately, Castiel thinks the space is too large for him. He is used to controlling much more ground, but never on his own. He can't defend

this entire house by himself. There are too many points of entry, too many weaknesses.

Castiel has made himself as at home here as he can, even if it's only for two days. He has spread his paperwork out over the kitchen table, letters of consolation and action reports and supply requests; he keeps his maps folded away out of sight, but they're handy, tucked into the cutlery drawer.

He removes his jacket and garrison cap, laying them over the back of one of the armchairs, and the heads towards the kitchen to get some work done. However, as he goes, he catches sight of himself in the mirror, and he stops.

It's been a long time since Castiel saw his own reflection properly, and he is by no means a vain man, but there is a marked difference between what he remembers of his own face and what he sees now. He looks older, more tired. His hair is growing out unevenly, and tufty where it's been flattened beneath his garrison cap. There is a lump of uneven scarring on one temple where his face hit the cobbles past Lanrivoaré.

Castiel looks away.

He sits down in the kitchen with his pencil and a few scraps of curled paper, and he gets to work. The room is quiet and still, which is good for half an hour or so, before he starts feeling jumpy, as though he's waiting for gunfire to shatter the silence. He makes himself a coffee, pouring from a real pot into his metal field mug, and he consigns himself to the hush of the rest of the evening, and then around twenty-one-forty, there is a knock on the front door.

Castiel lifts his head with a frown.

He gets up, crosses to the door, pulls it open, and there stands Dean on the front step. Castiel doesn't know why he expected any less.

As soon as Dean sees him, he pulls himself up tall as though to attention, expression solemn.

Castiel eyes him warily, one hand still on the door. “Dean.”

“Nice house, sir.”

“Thank you. It's not mine.” Castiel moves his weight from one foot to the other, self-conscious; he's so used to facing Dean under the full bulk of combats, webbing, haversack, musette bag, that standing here in his thin service uniform, without even his jacket on over the top, makes him feel strangely naked. He tucks a thumb under one strap of his suspenders to adjust it. “Everything alright?”

“Doing fine, sir. I'm here to escort you to the dance, is all.”

Castiel squints. “I'm not going.”

“Yeah, I heard that,” Dean says. “That's why I'm here.”

“I don't dance,” Castiel says flatly. He thought that Dean, of all people, would understand that.

“Okay, well, first of all, that's bull, because I know that you can dance,

and second of all, you don't have to dance with anyone!" Dean's face splits into a winning smile. "You can just stand around and watch me dance."

Castiel's mouth tightens into a thin line, embarrassment flaring hot along his jaw and throat. So Dean *did* know he was watching in Falmouth. He drops his eyes to the floor and shifts uncomfortably. "I don't want to do that," he mutters. He fidgets his hand along the door-jamb. "Besides, I need to be up early tomorrow. For a briefing."

Dean tips his head back with a groan. "Jesus. Come on, man. Please."

Castiel looks at him.

Dean says it again. "Please." He looks clean and fresh and painfully handsome; he no longer has that thin crust of blood and mud over his hands and face, no longer has camouflage-cream stains along the side of his nose, dirt under his fingernails. Even his head injury looks better, cleaner and more neatly stitched, the wound dulling from angry red to a dull brown, and his service uniform fits him well, and his expression is quietly earnest. "Come on. Cas. Pass the buck for once and come get drunk."

It's tempting. It really is. Castiel half-turns to look back longingly into the seclusion of his temporary accommodation. "I can't," he says, and he searches for an excuse. He rubs his thumb distractedly over a splinter in the door-frame. "I don't have any oil for my hair."

Dean rolls his eyes. "You're a dish, okay, you don't need any." He jerks his thumb over his shoulder. "Now, are you coming or do I gotta carry you?"

"Watch it, Winchester," Castiel grouches, but he has a hot flush rising

along his jaw, and with a sigh, he goes reluctantly back inside to retrieve his service jacket. He shrugs into it as he walks back towards Dean, does the buttons up, and he unfolds his garrison cap from his pocket. He fits it to his head, and then fixes Dean with an exasperated look. “Happy?”

Dean grins. “Delighted.”

They walk down the road together towards Brunssum centre, from which direction music can already be faintly heard, high brass notes spilling out into the street. Dean talks non-stop as they walk, about what his brother said in his letter, about the riddle Sam's girl made up – the answer to which is absolutely *teeth*, but Dean refuses to listen – and Castiel tells him, for the first time, about the letter he received from his family, the threat to take his house. Dean's only response is a long list of increasingly creative expletives; Castiel just raises his eyebrows, impressed.

As they head deeper into town, Castiel is again conscious of the fact that they have not yet spoken about their issues, but Dean keeps bring out a hilariously cruel impersonation of Major Campbell, regardless of how often Castiel says, “That's not funny and it's unprofessional”, because it makes Castiel smile – and so Castiel does not have the heart to risk ruining this. He swallows down everything that he is afraid of, and he follows Dean into the dance hall.

Inside, the room is packed. There is a big band in one corner, the bar stretched along the far side, and it seems as though every other spare inch of space is occupied by people: Dutch women laughing into their drinks, smiling shyly at the soldiers descending upon them; one couple ambitiously attempting a jitterbug, to the delight of the younger girls, while the rest of those dancing sway and shuffle out of their way; there are two men from Easy Company who appear to be ten seconds from a physical brawl, voices raised in unintelligible anger. Castiel bites back the instinctive wave of worry that hits him at the overwhelming noise of the place, and he follows Dean as he winds and weaves through the crowd. He just has time to catch a glimpse of a couple of Baker's NCOs before he and Dean are upon them.

“Hey!” Dean calls as he pushes his way into the throng, and he claps both hands hard onto someone's shoulders. “I return. And look who I found!”

The group turns, and they must already have been drinking for some time, as the men see him and immediately a cheer goes up. “Our fearsome commander,” Donald Hanscum exclaims passionately. “Lieutenant, can I get you a drink?”

Castiel eases awkwardly into their midst, tilting his shoulders to fit into the small space afforded in the crowd. “That's very generous, thank you,” he says, and he gives Hanscum a small nod. “Whatever is cheapest.”

The music is loud and brassy, the room pulsing with it, and pretty girls with curled hair take to the dance-floor, twisting and turning so their skirts flare out wide as neatly-scrubbed soldiers in service uniform clutch at their hands. An argument can be heard somewhere near the bar, and distantly, through the crowd, Castiel can spot Garrigan and Montgomery linking arms as they knock back beer from tall, dusty glasses. There are a handful of replacements from four-platoon tunelessly singing along to whatever the band is playing – a cover of a Duke Ellington number that Castiel just about recognises.

At first, there is an awkward, extended moment where no-one is sure what to talk about with an officer present. Tran clears his throat, and then Bradbury says conversationally, “So what are the odds of someone getting pummelled tonight?”

“Depends if we let Joe out on 'em,” Sergeant Milligan says, slapping Harvelle hard on the back with a laugh as bright and warm as it is contagious; even Ted du Mort grins.

“Yeah, yeah,” Joe says, and he jostles as though trying to fend off Milligan, but there's no real heart in it. “You wish – you just want to make money off my hard-won battles, that's all.”

“Who, us?” Corporal Lowell says, just as Bradbury breaks out, in a voice that pretends to be offended, “Joe, I'm hurt. When have any of us ever put down a wager on you?”

“I'd put money on Harvelle over anyone in 3rd Battalion,” Castiel ventures – never certain if he's successfully treading the line between professional and friendly, between not talking down to them and not diminishing his own authority, or the authority of any other commanding officer. To his relief, a couple of the men burst out with a laugh, and Dean grins.

“All of 3rd Battalion at once, more like, sir,” Harvelle says, and he has the cocky tilt of a smirk to his mouth that he hides behind his beer.

“I'm pretty sure that Max and Rudy are gonna have killed each other by the end of the night, at the very least,” Milligan says to Lowell, eyebrows raised, but nobody hears anymore about it, as Zeddmore breaks onto the scene, slinging an arm around Private Tran's neck.

“Evening, gents!” he near-enough shouts – the volume and the disorganised tilt of his garrison cap a good indication of how much he's had to drink already – and then he catches sight of Castiel and straightens up a little. “Lieutenant – evening, sir, good to see you.”

Castiel nods. “Ed. How is weekend leave treating you so far?”

“Sir, I'm in Paradise,” Zeddmore says warmly. “Tonight I got to eat food that wasn't heated in a mess tin--”

“Food that's hot, period,” Bradbury cuts in. “God – who even has the energy to heat up their rations these days?”

“--I got beer in my belly and there's more on its way,” Zeddmore goes on, leaning in conspiratorially and fisting a hand into Tran's jacket to keep from toppling over, “and between you and me, there's some sweet dish over thataway keeps giving me bedroom eyes like you would not believe, so – I'm good. Real good.”

“Ed, that's the goddamn bartender--”

“It's a fuckin' hat-stand, more like--”

“Hey, go get 'em, Ed,” Dean joins in, grinning wide. “You knock her dead.”

“That reminds me,” Tran says. “Listen up – what did the hat say to the tie?”

“Aw, jeez.”

“He said – you hang around here. I'll go on a head!”

Harvelle starts swearing at him, and there is a general sentiment of wanting Kevin dead for even making them have to listen to that, and at that moment, Hanscum comes squeezing back through the crowd, with a glass of beer in each hand.

“Lieutenant Novak,” Hanscum says, and he holds out one glass, clumsily slopping a little over the rim. “Oops – look out, sir--”

“I've got it – thank you.” Castiel takes the precariously-full glass from him, holds it up flat and level to his mouth, and sips carefully from the top. Once he's satisfied that he's drained enough to be able to hold it without throwing his drink all over himself, he lowers it, and, emboldened by the first fizzy rush inside his mouth, he says, “I have a joke.”

The men lift their heads and look his way.

Castiel leans closer into the circle, raises his voice a little so they can all hear him, and he asks, “What do you get when you cross a joke with a rhetorical question?”

There is silence among the men, who stare at him as they wait for the answer. That moment stretches longer and longer, a little unsure, and then finally, Dean snorts, and Bradbury lets out an ugly laugh.

Harvelle says, “Jesus Christ, sir.”

Castiel shakes his head. “My talents are wasted on you.”

“Oh,” Bradbury says after a beat, stretching the sound out long and slow. “Okay, I get it, sir – you're deliberately being not funny.”

Castiel tries not to smile. “That hurts, Lance Corporal.” Part of why he regrets his promotion to company commanding officer is this, right here – three years training with one-platoon, living more or less in each other's pockets, means that even in spite of the bridge between

officer and enlisted, they were close in whatever way they could be. He doesn't have that anymore. Most days in the field, especially in daily combat as they have been recently, he barely gets the time to talk to anyone below the rank of staff sergeant, and it can be lonely.

Dean claps his hands together. “Hey, hang on, I got one – so why did the scarecrow get promoted?”

“For God's sake,” Castiel says, and he drinks.

“Wait a second, I actually don't know this one--”

“How in the hell do you not know this one, Don – he only told everyone, all fuckin' day, as soon as he got the letter--”

“Oh, I'm sorry, except I was in the freaking hospital.”

Tran makes an incredulous noise in the back of his throat. “The hospital? Since when?”

“Since I got shot, fat-head – shows how much attention you pay.”

“So this scarecrow,” Dean starts up again, louder now, “he gets promoted. Because he was--”

“Outstanding in his field,” Castiel recites, along with everyone else who has heard the joke before, but Dean's eyes are only on Castiel. His smile spreads wider until the corners of his eyes crease up. Castiel can feel something in his own face echo it, the corners of his mouth tilting

up out of his control, and he should stop looking at Dean. They should stop looking at each other.

Castiel can hear the conversation pick up, keep rolling, but he isn't paying attention. Dean is looking at him, and in this light, with the soft yellow glow of the lamplight catching on his skin, he is more handsome than ever. His eyes look absurdly green, and Castiel wants badly to kiss him.

“--think, Lieutenant?”

Castiel blinks, and he glances over to where Bradbury is looking at him expectantly. “Sorry. I didn't catch that.”

“You figure we're gonna get medals for Aachen?”

“Naturally,” Castiel says. “A Congressional Medal of Honour for every one of us.”

Bradbury makes an indignant noise of complaint, quickly picked up by Zeddmore. “Come on, sir – you don't think we earned it?”

“I heard the 117th are getting something,” Tran cuts in. “Not a medal, but something.”

“Thank you, that's very informative,” Zeddmore replies.

“No, they are! For Aachen. Frank told me.”

“What the fuck? We were right next to those guys, we were doing the same goddamn thing--”

“Well, clearly not, or else we'd be getting--”

Castiel takes another mouthful of beer. It's bitter and cold, and it's the best thing Castiel has tasted in a long time. Five months, he realises. It's been five months since he had a fucking beer.

“Christ,” he says out loud, and he tips his glass up and drains it.

Milligan starts laughing. “You alright, lieutenant?”

Castiel swallows the last of it, and lowers his glass. “Five months, Sergeant.” He holds the glass up and shakes it a little, sloshing the leftover foam, as he feels the beer buzz through him pleasantly. “I'm getting another one.”

Zeddmore and Hanscum appear absolutely ecstatic at this declaration.

Before Castiel goes, he thinks that there's no point in him squeezing in along the bar somewhere and waiting for ten minutes to get one beer for himself, and then for others to need to do the exact same within the next half hour – he can get a couple of beers, and then someone else can do the honours next time. He turns back and peers over the crowd to find Inias, and see if he wants another drink.

Then Castiel remembers.

This time, the realisation doesn't feel like an attack. It doesn't hurt like a bayonet to the gut; he isn't winded by it. He just suddenly understands that he is at a dance hall without Inias, for the first time in fifteen years, and that there will be no ridiculous pick-up lines, no obscene drinking competitions, no attempts to teach Castiel how to be charming and irresistible. It's over.

The knowledge settles heavily on him, a crushing weight on his shoulders, and he stands there in the crowd, motionless, with his empty beer glass held tightly in one hand. He tries to think what he is supposed to do now, without him, and he comes up short.

“Sir?” Milligan's voice comes drifting over. “Lieutenant--”

“Excuse me,” Castiel says distantly, and he pushes away through the crowd. He makes for the bar, wedging himself in tightly between two arguing staff-sergeants who pay him no attention. He sets his empty glass down on the bar-top, and he swallows down the bitter taste in his mouth, and he focuses on breathing. He clenches his jaw against the noise that swarms and crashes all around him – the swell of the band, trumpets blaring, the near-deafening chatter of six hundred simultaneous conversations, the yell of someone starting a fight out towards the dance-floor – and he tries to stop thinking.

It isn't easy to turn his brain off, though. One minute he is reliving every dance hall with Inias by his side – every school dance, every awkward teenage endeavour to attract attention, every uncomfortable party where Castiel tried to talk to girls as though he was interested in taking them home, every Bedford bar and jitterbug, weekend-leave in Fort Belvoir, Fort Meade, Fort fucking Blanding – and then it is beating inside his head louder than the percussion at the back of the band. *You can't keep them safe. You can't keep them safe.*

If someone were going to assault through this building, it would be

the easiest thing in the world. One well-thrown grenade, towards the band, where the concentration of people is thickest, could almost take out the whole room. The windows are shuttered, leaving the double doors that they came in through as the only way out; Castiel would put down a gunner position there and cut down any survivors who came spilling out. It would be easy.

The idea curls in his stomach, cold-edged with panic, and he tells himself that isn't going to happen. It isn't going to happen. They're safe here – but if, for any reason, this building *were* shelled, or if the Luftwaffe came screaming over head to drop bombs on this place, Castiel would lose his entire company. He might even be killed himself.

He tries to scan the room for a better way to secure this place – Jesus, he hasn't even checked the perimeter – but there is no other exit, and as he looks around, his vision is chopped up by moving bodies. The crowd sways and pulses, men snaking through the crowd with elbows up to get to the dance-floor, women twirling, soldiers shouting, and everything is pressing in on Castiel. The room is getting smaller. He can't breathe. A single shell and they're all dead. They can't escape, they won't be able to get out – he can't get out – he can't get out.

Something touches his elbow, and he jerks sharply away, all the air in his lungs leaving him in one panicked burst – and he finds Dean standing just beside him.

“Dean,” he says, by accident, and then, “Sergeant.” He takes a deep breath. “Winchester. You--”

“Can't hear you,” Dean shouts over the music, and he taps the shell of his ear with one finger. “Outside, sir?”

Castiel swallows. “Yes.”

Dean turns and leads the way out, using his height and breadth to push easily through the swell of people, and in doing so, clears a path for Castiel, who follows numbly. He swallows around the feeling that his throat is closing up, and he tightens his fists until his fingernails dig in, sharp and painful enough to fend off panic.

At last, they get through the door and spill out onto the street. Dean veers right and then turns back to face Castiel, but Castiel goes the other way and starts off down the street. He fishes into the pocket of his service jacket for his cigarette tin, flicks agitatedly at the dented corner for a moment, and then fumbles to pry it open. Still walking, he gets a cigarette out, sets it to his mouth, and tries to light it three times without success. His hands are trembling.

“You need a light, lieutenant?”

Castiel jumps, and then he looks over and registers First Sergeant Masters, and he exhales.

“Sergeant,” he says. “Please - I think my lighter must be out.”

Masters comes over, fishing in his jacket for his own lighter, and then he comes to Castiel's aid. Castiel holds his cigarette between his lips, and keeps his hands busy in stowing his cigarette tin, rather than let his First Sergeant see him shaking.

“Thank you,” Castiel says, once his cigarette has caught, and he gives Masters a small, grateful half-smile.

“No problem.” Masters gives him a nod, and he tucks his lighter back into his jacket. “You have a good night, lieutenant.”

“Yes – thank you. You too.”

As Masters heads back to whatever conversation he was embroiled in before he came to his CO's rescue, Castiel takes a long drag, and fills his lungs with smoke. It doesn't quite steady his hands, but it helps.

Castiel pulls on his cigarette again, and turns back the way he came. Just past the door into the dance hall, Dean leans lazily back against the brick wall, hands in the pockets of his dress pants. Castiel moves towards him, and Dean looks up as he approaches.

“Lieutenant,” he says, once Castiel has side-stepped the doorway back into the hall, and has come to join him on the far sidewalk.

“Winchester.” Castiel stops opposite him, and he considers whether he should say something about Dean's hands being in his pockets while he's in service uniform. He exhales smoke, and tries to keep up something kind of facade that he wasn't three seconds from having a nervous breakdown in there. “Is everything alright?”

Dean nods. “Yeah, I'm fine, sir. You okay?”

“Fine.” Castiel jerks his head over, dismissive. “Just... hot inside. You want a smoke?”

“Yeah, sure. Thanks, sir.”

Castiel gets his cigarette tin out again, and he tosses it across to Dean, who catches it easily. He looks away down the street as Dean opens it

and goes for a cigarette, but in his peripheral vision, Castiel watches as Dean goes automatically for the first cigarette, that first half-smoked stub from Omaha – and then sees as he skips over it and chooses another one.

Dean lights up with his own lighter, and then he passes the tin back. For a moment, Castiel just turns it over and over in his hands. He itches to keep flicking at the bent corner, but he is conscious of it as a nervous tic of which his men, and Dean in particular, must be aware. He pushes it back into his pocket, and he lifts his hand to his cigarette for another long pull.

“This'll be good for morale,” Dean says thoughtfully, after a beat, as he gazes into the dance hall, where everything is a blur of olive-drab with the occasional burst of colour from a girl's dress.

Off-hand, Castiel says around his cigarette, “One track mind.”

Dean looks back at Castiel, and he raises his eyebrows. “What, you don't think I should worry about it?”

Castiel frowns. “Not twenty-four-seven.” Dean makes it sound as though Castiel is implying that he should tell the entire company to fuck off and hang; that isn't what Castiel means. He sees the way that Dean runs himself ragged at times, checking up on everyone, telling the same ten jokes and ribbing at men until they're smiling under their camouflage cream. It's remarkable, but not at the expense of Dean's own well-being.

“That's my job,” Dean says. He takes his cigarette out of his mouth, smoke rushing out past his lips as he speaks. “You do your thing, okay, you plan attacks and you coordinate platoons and keep us stocked in food and ammo – I take care of people. When I got assigned combat medic with the 104th, I didn't figure that my job ended at

pulling out shrapnel, patching up blisters, you know - stopping the bleeding and sewing up holes. I gotta look after these guys.” He reaches up with one hand, his cigarette trapped between two knuckles, and he taps his fingertips to his temple. “And that means up here too.”

Castiel opens his mouth to explain that he understands, that all he wants is for Dean to remember to take care of himself too, but Dean doesn't stop there.

“You heard what happened in Able Company, right? Happened again yesterday. On the way over here. Charlie Company.” Dean shakes his head, pulls on his cigarette. His voice is tight in his throat. “God knows why going to a goddamn recreation area was the breaking point, but... maybe he figured that after it gets better it always gets worse. The point is, when it comes to the field, I lose more than I save. Every fucking time.”

“Dean, that's not--”

“I know,” Dean takes a deep breath. “That's not my fault. That's just bad luck, I know that. Fine. But I gotta feel like I'm doing something worthwhile. I gotta get as many people home to their families as I can, and shit, if that includes playing the clown and making 'em smile, worrying about whether they're happy, so they don't shoot themselves in the fucking head as soon as a Tiger rolls into view--” He shrugs loosely. His cigarette has been burning down towards the end between his fingers, and spills cold ash over the back of his hand.

“Then that's me.”

Castiel means to tell him that he's doing the right thing, that he's confident that without Dean, Baker would have fallen apart a long time ago – but then he gets caught on what Dean has said, and he finds himself re-evaluating every instance where Dean has found him just at the moment where Castiel thought he was losing his mind.

“Is that why you take care of me?”

Dean gives a half-laugh. “Someone has to.” Castiel doesn't say anything, and Dean looks at him, and he must realise that Castiel isn't joking. Something strange and unreadable flickers across his face then, his eyes narrowing. “No,” he says, at last. “That isn't why.”

Castiel nods. He drops his gaze, shifting away from Dean, and he taps the ash from his cigarette. “Forgive me,” he says. “I didn't mean to pry, or push. I just--” He forces himself to say it. “Worry, sometimes. That you always put yourself last.”

“It's okay. I can take care of myself.” Dean smirks, mouth curving around his cigarette. “We Winchesters are tough little fuckers.”

Castiel cants his head over to one side. “I don't doubt that.”

Dean pushes himself off from the wall, takes a long drag from his cigarette that burns it right down to the end, and then he flicks it away. He says, “So I wanna let you in on something,” and he exhales smoke.

“I'm listening.”

“I've been talking to Joe and Charlie all goddamn night about this one girl,” Dean says, and something sinks heavy in Castiel's stomach. It must read on his face, because the next thing he knows, Dean has a hand on his arm, and is saying, “No, no – listen to me. Listen. I've been talking all night. Almost every guy I hang around with in there knows I'm after this girl. And I've asked Joe to give me a hand covering for me if, you know.” He tilts his head over conspiratorially.

“If I don't make it back to our billet. To keep Virgil from having my ass, and above all, to make sure that my stern, asshole commanding officer doesn't find out.”

Castiel stares at him, incredulous. “Are you--”

“So when it comes to time to get outta here... I'm gonna leave with one of these girls, and I'm gonna walk her home, and then I'm gonna tell her I changed my mind, and then I'm gonna be unaccounted for, all night.” Dean raises his eyebrows. “You follow me?”

For a moment, Castiel is dumbfounded. He opens his mouth, and nothing comes out, stunned by Dean being, of all things, organised. No – *tactical.* He remembers Dean saying, once upon a time, that having everything so meticulously planned destroyed some of the romance of the encounter; Castiel disagrees. He is standing in the street, surrounded by the loud, raucous good humour of what feels like the entire 2nd Battalion, and Dean is here telling him that he has made tactical plans to allow them to be together tonight, and Castiel feels lit up with it. He can feel a dull heat sparking in his belly at the very idea. “It's a good plan,” he manages, at last.

Dean smirks. “Yeah, you like that?”

Castiel is looking at his mouth. “Clearly I neglected to mention that careful, well thought-out strategy is the fastest way to get me hot.”

Dean laughs. “Is that so? You want me to keep going, tell you all about my contingency plan?”

A contingency plan – Christ. “Tell me.”

Dean steps in close, his mouth splitting into a grin. “If the girl tells anyone that she didn't go home with me last night, I'm going to tell the guys I was so drunk I passed out. And I scouted out the perfect place to claim that I woke up – quiet, out of the way, behind some hedges so visibility is poor--”

“God, yes,” Castiel says, dead-pan, and he tries not to smile. “Keep going. Tell me more.”

“--and then I've got – are you ready for this?” Dean says, and he leans in closer, drops his voice to a low, seductive thing, and quirks his eyebrows up. “Plausible deniability.”

Jesus, Castiel wants to kiss him.

“Hey!” Seemingly out of nowhere, there is Bradbury, with Zeddmore just behind him, and Castiel straightens bolt upright, backing a step away from Dean. He puts his cigarette back to his lips and pulls on it as Bradbury stands between them and grins. “How's it going, sir, doc?”

Castiel looks at Dean. “Winchester was just regaling me with some of his strategic opinions,” he says, and he doesn't smile, but he lifts his eyebrows just slightly, and he swears he sees colour come up on Dean's cheeks.

“Oh yeah, what's that on?” Zeddmore says. His words are slightly slurred, his smile too wide and the hunch of his shoulders unbalanced. “Trust me, doc doesn't know shit about anything. Whatever he told you – do the opposite. Especially if it's to do with girls – you after a dame, sir?”

Castiel smiles. “Not tonight.”

“Come on, are we going back inside, or what?” Dean interrupts, and he takes hold of Bradbury by the shoulders, turns him one-eighty degrees and starts steering him back towards the dance hall. “I could do with a drink or seven.”

Castiel takes a deep breath and follows.

The band has struck up a slower number now, and near enough everywhere Castiel looks, there are soldiers with Dutch girls, swaying together and smiling. He can see Corporal Quentin with a pretty blonde woman resting her head on his shoulder; there is Miller glowering from the sidelines at Corporal Doe as he sweeps a girl off her feet; Castiel can even see Lieutenant Hester up on the dance-floor with a partner, which is impressive. Castiel was always somewhat under the impression that Hester came into this world fully-formed and devoid of personality, but apparently someone finds him bearable enough.

Dean lifts two fingers to his brow as though to tilt his garrison cap, and says, “Excuse me – there's a girl with an empty glass there who looks like she might be angling for a refill.”

Castiel nods, and he watches Dean weave his way through the crowd towards her. She's tall and pretty in a delicate, pinkish way, blushing as she takes Dean's hand, and he leads her out onto the dance-floor. Dean smiles, says something to her, and then he glances back Castiel's way, catching his eye across the distance.

“Can I get you anything, sir?” Du Mort asks from somewhere beside Castiel.

Castiel politely declines – he feels he's relied too much on the

generosity of his men already – and he buys the next round. Beers for ten people, which his wallet will feel in the morning, but he feels more or less good for the first time in a long time. He drinks his beer, and he watches Dean on the dance-floor.

He does a neat, boring little four-step with her, but he talks to her as he does, and Castiel knows first-hand how charming Dean can be when he tries. The next song is faster, brass louder, a Sinatra number that Castiel recognises, and which gets a couple of jeers from the crowd who remain unimpressed with Sinatra as an individual. Dean and the Dutch broad start moving a little faster.

Dean twirls her under his arm, and his eyes meet Castiel's while her back is turned. The eye-contact only lasts a split-second, but it's time enough for Dean's smile to widen, and then she comes back, and she twists and bobs, sways from side to side against his chest. His wide, easy smile never falters once, and his movements are quick and sure, his hand confident on the small of her back. And always – over her head, over her shoulder, past her as she spins and steps and sways – his eyes find Castiel.

The night that follows is a dizzying whirl of good chaos: Castiel buying drinks, breaking up fights when an inflammatory comment about Harvelle's sweetheart has him swinging for Sorento's head, arguing military strategy with Gabriel in a loud enough voice that his four beers are probably implicitly understood by everyone within ten feet, smoking down to his last cigarette, knocking his own garrison cap into a puddle of beer.

He isn't drunk by any means, but he's buzzed enough to let Hanscum try and arm wrestle him, and when Dean comes over slightly before midnight to declare that he has a beautiful young lady in need of escorting home through the dangerous dark, Castiel is just tipsy enough to lean in close and, in a voice audible to everyone, to say, “Just a walk home, Winchester. Curfew is oh-one-hundred.”

Dean nods. “Copy that, sir.”

He leaves then, his arm slung around her waist, and Castiel gives it another fifteen minutes or so before he follows suit. He finishes his beer, and then he makes his farewells to whatever men are still hanging around the gradually thinning crowd of the dance hall, and he heads out.

The street outside is cold and quiet, the noise of the dance fading behind him as he walks. Overhead, the cloud cover has cleared to leave behind a sky that is dark and purplish with stars. Castiel pushes his hands into the pockets of his dress pants, throwing uniform regulations to the wind for once, and he feels the cold touch of his crucifix at the bottom of one pocket as he makes for his billet.

There is no sign of Dean when Castiel first arrives. He pauses for a moment on his step, deliberately taking a long time with his key and glancing over his shoulder, and then he lets himself in. He fumbles for the lamp, and then draws the black-out blinds. He unbuttons and shrugs out of his service jacket, folding it over a chair.

Zero-dark-twenty-two, according to his watch. He wants a smoke, but he's out of cigarettes. He toes off his shoes, and is just starting to rummage idly through kitchen cabinets in search of some alcohol that the owners of the house might have abandoned when there is a knock on the door.

Castiel closes the kitchen cupboard. He crosses the sitting room, and opens the door, and there is Dean on the front step, hands in the pockets of his dress pants, shoulders hunched close against the cold. His garrison cap is lopsided. “Evening,” he says.

Castiel looks over Dean's shoulder. The road is empty. There is yellow light flickering through the windows of one house the other side of the

street, but otherwise, nothing. He looks back at Dean. “Get in here, it's freezing.”

Dean ducks his head as he steps through the door, and while Castiel locks the door behind him, Dean sweeps the garrison cap backwards off his head. He folds it between his hands. For a moment, Castiel just watches him and says nothing.

He regrets having taken his jacket off. He always feels more secure with the neatly fastened buttons, the thick material, the shoulder padding. Castiel adjusts the strap of his suspenders. He smoothes his hands distractedly over his thighs, pinches the crease of his dress pants. He should say something. He still the dim fizz of alcohol in his veins, making him feel loose and warm, but that doesn't make this any easier.

“Was she upset?”

Dean looks over. If he's surprised at the question, he doesn't show it. “Nah,” he says, and he jerks one shoulder in a lazy half-shrug. “I think she changed her mind, too. She said thanks for walking her home and that she hoped she'd see me again sometime – and then she was gone before I even had the chance, so.”

Castiel nods. “Alright.” He hesitates; now that he's got Dean here, he doesn't know what to say. “Do you... want a drink?”

Dean raises his eyebrows. “Do you have a drink?”

“I don't know.” Castiel glances back towards the kitchen. “I was just looking a moment ago.”

“Oh. Okay.” Dean turns his cap over in his hands. He looks at it and not at Castiel when he finally says, “We still haven't talked about this, you know.”

Castiel lets out his breath. “No, we haven't.”

Dean sets down his cap, balancing it carefully on the back of the armchair alongside Castiel's service jacket. He lifts his head, then, and meets Castiel's eyes. It isn't that he looks expectant, but it is clear that he is waiting – because this conversation they need to have isn't precisely two-sided. Castiel is the one who has fucked up time and time again; he is the one who needs to explain himself. The problem is that there is no easy way to do this without telling Dean everything.

He breathes, and he tries to summon the courage to start talking, and the wrong words come out. “How come this is so easy for you?”

Dean blinks, taken aback.

That's not what Castiel meant to say, but he can't stop now – because it's true, and he doesn't understand. “Okay, I know that we need to talk – I know I'm the one who needs to do the talking, but I just don't get it,” he says.

This is going wrong. He should be apologising, should be explaining himself and why he's been such an asshole for so long, but all he can think of is Dean. Dean, always exactly where Castiel needs him to be, always saying exactly the right thing even when Castiel isn't ready yet to hear it. Dean touching the back of his hand, the edge of his jaw, kissing his fucking forehead – when he can't breathe and he doesn't know what he's supposed to be doing and how to keep going. Dean being pushed away, and pushed away, and coming back every time. Dean worrying about him after Brest, and getting snapped at for his troubles, getting his life endangered, getting told to fuck off, getting

punched in the goddamn mouth – and coming back. Dean, always coming back. Dean being willing to listen when Castiel finally figures out how to say that he's sorry. Dean. Impossibly patient even from the beginning, like he's made his peace with what they're doing and he's just waiting for Castiel to catch up.

Dean is silent, eyes on Castiel, and he's not judgemental – even though Castiel is supposed to be talking about his issues, and instead once again, he's railing on Dean instead. And once again, Dean is just waiting, and what the fuck is that?

“How can you just not care?” Castiel says. “I don't – is it just different, in Kansas? Is this okay, where you're from?” He manages to swallow the faint flicker of hope in his throat. It isn't time to think about that. “Were you just raised to think that this is okay? I don't understand.”

Dean's eyes shift from Castiel to a spot somewhere past him and back again. “I don't know,” he says. “I just... never really think about it.”

Castiel stares at him, uncomprehending. “What does that *mean*?”

Dean gives a loose shrug. “I mean... I don't put much stock in the Almighty, so I ain't exactly afraid of God's wrath.” He tips his head over to one side. “Plus, I figure if there's a hell it can't be much worse than Germany.”

Castiel swallows. “Aren't you scared?”

Dean looks at him hard. “Of what?” he says, and it sinks in Castiel's stomach. Dean doesn't stop there; he takes a step closer. “Of taking a bullet to the head?” He grimaces. “Sure. Never getting to see Sammy again? Yeah, that scares me. Stepping on a mine, getting run over by a tank, losing my legs, going blind--” he is speaking faster and faster,

now, voice growing louder, and Castiel leans back. He is watching something unfold in Dean that he has never seen before. “--watching my friends get taken out one by one, not being able to save anybody – yeah. Of course I'm fucking scared.” Dean is breathing hard. His hands are curled into fists at his sides. He exhales, a short, sharp burst. “Just not of this.”

The space between them is lessening, Dean taking slow steps towards Castiel as he speaks, and Castiel is struck with the old, familiar urge to back away and find some escape, but he holds himself still, stands up tall. He can hear his heartbeat in his ears the same way he feels his pulse spike when he hears a shell go off.

“I got so much else to be scared of here,” Dean says. “I don't think I could do it if I was scared of us, too.”

Castiel hears *us* and it twists something in his gut. He says, “I don't know how not to be afraid.”

He has rehearsed the things he needs to say to Dean, but he has not rehearsed this. He had hoped this might be like opening the floodgates, letting everything he feels and fears spill free and out of control so that he can't hold anything back – but this isn't like that. He struggles for every word.

“I don't how to react, if not with anger,” Castiel says, and he drops his eyes away from Dean, stares down at the floor. “I've spent too long building myself up to be bulletproof for these men – I can't break now. But you--” He stops himself short, and he takes a deep, slow breath. “You terrify me.” He swallows, and he thinks of all the times Dean has called his bluff, leaned in close and said, *tell me you're scared shitless.* “I admit it now.”

Dean is silent, unmoving. Castiel can't look at him.

“Jesus,” he says, and he almost wants to laugh. “I am so afraid of what you do to me. But the person I want to be when I'm with you is not compatible with First Lieutenant Novak, and Inias knew, he told me--” Castiel thinks, *he warned me,* and he bites the word back. “And I didn't listen. Because – fuck, what does it matter if France is coming down around us, and I'm losing men, and I'm losing my mind – what does any of it fucking matter – if I get to be near to you.”

Castiel's hands tighten into fists at his sides until he feels the bite of his fingernails into his palm.

“So I'm sorry,” he says. “I'm sorry.” He searches for the words as though he's going to find the right thing to say in the space between them, and he swallows. “For being wildly unprofessional, for nearly getting you killed, for blacking your eye and splitting your lip, for cutting you out—” He takes a deep, slow, steadying breath. “For every single time that I have cut you out – and just expected you to still be there afterwards. For the way I have treated you.”

Castiel clenches his jaw, and he looks up at Dean. He makes himself hold Dean's eyes, and he breathes through the tightening anxiety in his throat.

“All I know,” he says, slow and quiet, “is that when I'm at my worst, you are the only thing that makes this feel possible. You ground me. And I--”

The words rise in his throat like a bubble of blood. He thinks of a bullet through the windpipe, the way you'd choke on it. *I love you.* He stares at Dean, and he doesn't breathe, and he tries to think of anything else but that.

He inhales, and in a voice quiet enough that maybe Dean won't be able to hear him, he says, “I want you. With me. Always.” He swallows. “Whatever happens. Whatever that means.”

He can't hold Dean's eyes any longer, and he looks away, mouth twisting with uncertainty, and when he glances back, there is something breaking open on Dean's face, something warm and soft and golden.

Dean tucks his bottom lip behind his teeth to keep the start of a slow, wide smile, and then he takes a small step forwards into Castiel's space. He settles two hands on Castiel's hips, and he tilts his head down towards Castiel's, and he says, “Well, I'll be damned, sir. Are you asking me to go steady?”

It's not what Castiel was expecting him to say, and somehow it's just ridiculous enough that it undercuts all Castiel's heart-clenching fears, and he lets out a breath of a relief. He turns his head away, rolling his eyes. “Shut the hell up,” he says, even as all the tension and panic bleeds from his body.

“I mean, of course, I will, sir, I'm very taken with you,” Dean says, and he shifts back slightly, flattens a hand to his collarbone like some shy dame in the movies, “I just don't want you to go getting any ideas about the kinda girl I am--”

“I swear to God, Winchester--”

“See, I'm saving myself for marriage.”

Castiel pushes Dean's hands away from him. “Have I told you recently you're a pain in my ass?”

Dean stops holding back; his mouth splits into an enormous grin, like he thinks he's the funniest person alive. “Not in a while, actually,” he says, all idiotic, cocky bravado.

Castiel huffs his breath out, because truthfully, he doesn't know why he expected any less from Dean, but when he goes to walk away, Dean catches hold of his elbow and pulls him back.

Held fast, Castiel lifts his eyes reluctantly to Dean's. “What?” he grumbles.

Dean takes Castiel's face in two hands, as though to kiss him, but he doesn't, not immediately. For a moment, he just looks at him, his face quiet and earnest, that smile still lifting his mouth, and Castiel looks back at him with everything coiled so tightly in his chest that he doesn't know what he feels anymore. His expression softens, and he swallows, his eyes falling to Dean's mouth, and then, finally, Dean kisses him, sweet and slow. All the remaining tension seeps out of Castiel's shoulders; he melts. He has been so long without this. Alcohol-emboldened, his hands find their way to curl in front of Dean's shirt, and he eases up onto tiptoes – Dean in his dress shoes, Castiel in his socks – to press in closer. He opens his mouth, lets Dean capture his bottom lip.

Dean's mouth curves into a smile, and one hand leaves Castiel's face to settle instead on his waist. His thumb rubs circles into Castiel's skin through the fabric of his dress shirt, lifting a shiver along Castiel's spine. He wants to be touched by Dean; he wants to touch. Dean seems to be somewhere along a similar train of thought, as he reaches up to open the knot of Castiel's tie and pull it through.

Using his hands in Dean's clothes, Castiel pushes him backwards towards the wall, and Dean walks with him, hooking his fingers into Castiel's suspenders to pull him along. However, when Dean's back

hits the wall, he pulls away and looks at Castiel. “Whoa – what are you doing?”

Castiel freezes. His hands tighten reflexively in Dean's shirt and he tries to think what he is doing wrong. What has he done to make Dean change his mind? Has Castiel somehow misread their entire conversation – is this not something they do anymore?

Dean says, “We've actually got a bed for once.”

For a second, Castiel is hesitant, flustered. Doing this in a bed seems like the jurisdiction of normal people, married couples and half-drunk boys home from the town dance with a nice girl. He swallows that down, and he nods. “Yeah,” he says. “The bed.”

He backs off to give Dean some room, and his eyes fall to watch Dean start undoing his service jacket. Castiel steps forwards into his space and helps him, and then Dean's fingers are quick at Castiel's collar instead, unbuttoning. Castiel uses his grip on the front of Dean's jacket to pull him along.

Somewhere between here and the stairs, Castiel gets the last of the buttons undone. Dean shrugs out of his jacket to leave it on the floor – against military dress standards, Castiel thinks instinctively; he should hang it up, take better care of it – and then Dean ducks his head and kisses Castiel, and he stops caring about dress standards.

Dean's hands are cold as they unbutton Castiel's shirt, but his mouth is warm and Castiel tilts his chin up into the kiss. Dean works at his tie, undoing the knot and then pulling the fabric through. He moves a little awkwardly as he toes off his shoes, and then he's back, sliding a hand around the small of Castiel's back to drag him in close. They're flush for a moment, chest to chest, before Castiel pulls away to twist his arms out of his shirt. It gets caught on Dean's hand; he tosses it

away to crumple on the floor somewhere. Castiel isn't paying attention.

They move quickly up the narrow stairs, Castiel following behind Dean with his eyes on Dean's ass and the curve of his thighs, and then at the top, Dean turns and reaches for Castiel again.

He pushes Dean's suspenders clear of his shoulders, and then only manages to get three buttons of Dean's dress shirt undone before Dean gets impatient. He leans back, pinches the back of his shirt collar and jerks the whole thing off over his head.

Castiel tilts back with the small huff of an almost-laugh as one flapping sleeve nearly catches him in the face, and when Dean comes back, his neatly-oiled hair is all in disarray, cowlick curling over his forehead.

Dean sees him looking. “What?”

Castiel shakes his head, and then Dean he reasserts his hands at Castiel’s jawline and gently tilts his head back up; then, so carefully that it can barely be felt, Dean kisses him. Once. And then again.

Moving slowly, open-mouthed, the soft catch and drag of lips – one, two, three – coming together. Breathing shallowly, air damp inside their mouths where one meets the other. Castiel captures Dean’s bottom lip in a lazy nudge of teeth, easing the tip of his tongue over it, and he falls for the sound Dean makes: the stuttering start of a gasp, inhaling like he’s deflated and trying to fill himself back up, one moment at a time. The way his fingers twitch against Castiel’s skin, the way he keeps his eyes on Castiel when he has to pull back a second to bend and pull his dress shoes and socks off, and then the way he curves back in like coming home – Castiel wants it all. He takes hold of Dean's hips and pulls him along backwards.

The backs of Castiel's calves hit the edge of the bed, and he drops to sit. It's so long since he had a bed that he is momentarily taken aback by how low it is, but then Dean is standing over him. Bare-footed, in only his greying cotton undershirt and dress pants, he bends almost double, takes Castiel's face in his hands, and kisses him, soft and slow.

Castiel's hands go to Dean's hips, untucking his undershirt, batting the loose ends of Dean's suspenders out of the way to get at the button and fly. There is a brief moment where he is shot through with courage, and so he pulls away from Dean, leans forwards, and he pushes Dean's undershirt up to kiss Dean's stomach. As Dean straightens, Castiel kisses the soft give of his belly, the arrow of fair, coarse hair past his bellybutton, and he feels more than hears when Dean's breath catches.

He presses careful, closed-mouth kisses everywhere he can reach, breath ghosting over Dean's skin. Dean is hot, flushed, everywhere Castiel meets him; Castiel can taste the nervous wanting sweat of him when he opens his mouth. He kisses the V of Dean's hipbones where they disappear into his pants, and his abdomen, stomach muscles fluttering beneath Castiel's lips as Dean tries to hold still. He leans back, and almost reverently he cups his hands around Dean's calves. His hands skate lightly up Dean's legs, lets his fingers curve around the back of Dean's kneecaps, and then both hands come up to press flat palms to the inside curve of his thighs, pushing slowly upwards, the fabric of Dean’s pants catching at the heels of his hands. Castiel has never touched Dean like this before.

First he pushes his forehead against the jut of Dean’s hip. Then he tilts his chin up, touches his lips there, and moves in towards the thick line of Dean inside his pants, his breath a warm rush. Then, pressing the inside curve of his lips over the cotton-clad bulge, he opens his mouth.

With a low noise in the back of his throat, Dean’s hips jerk unconsciously forwards, accidentally pushing his clothed cock into Castiel’s face as he does so, and Castiel would almost smile at that –

but he wants to see Dean unravel further, faster, more completely. He drags his lips upwards to where he can feel the head of Dean’s cock through his clothes, mouthing at him until Dean is breathing ragged, his legs shaking beneath him as he tries to keep still. It’s a poor attempt; his whole body is pitching in shallow rolls, his gasps broken and stuttering – and then Dean’s got a hand on each of his shoulders and he’s hauling Castiel upright, up and kissing him so hard he’s almost bent backwards, their hips perfectly lining up.

They are pressed together from chest to pelvis, heat thrumming finely beneath their skin and every place they touch. The air is cold on Castiel’s bare skin, but pressed this close to Dean, he can’t feel a thing; Dean’s hands are warm where they graze accidentally against Castiel’s stomach, tugging the hem of his undershirt out from where it's tucked into his dress pants. Dean kisses like a rising flood, an incremental build and build. He unzips Castiel's pants, pushes the fly wide, and shimmies the fabric down over his hips. Castiel kicks out of his pants, stepping out of them where they puddle around his ankles. The crucifix clatters out of his pocket onto the floor.

If Castiel is self-conscious at all about being in his underwear in front of Dean, he quickly forgets it when Dean manhandles him back towards the bed. Dean pushes at him, manoeuvres him, until he's flat on his back on the bed, and then Dean crawls inelegantly over him, settles with one knee between Castiel's thighs. He is still wearing his pants, and he pauses there for a moment, and looks down at Castiel.

For a second, Castiel can only look back – at the peppering of small bruises on his left shoulder, the same ones Castiel has, from dropping heavily into prone position during a firefight; at the faint rash on his shoulders where his webbing rubs; at the awkward tan-line at the base of his throat where the collar of his combat jacket would usually sit; at the ridge of his shrapnel wounds, just waiting to scar; at the smudge of dried camouflage cream in the hinge of his jaw where he wasn't thorough in showering. He wonders if they'll ever stop having combat between them.

Then Castiel can't just keep staring anymore, and something about the way that Dean looks at him is too much for him to even think about,

so he slides a hand around the back of Dean's head and he pulls him down into a kiss.

Dean plants a hand either side of Castiel's head, the bed complaining beneath their weight, and they kiss and kiss again. Dean leans into the touch of Castiel's hands, pushing towards him, and when Castiel catches Dean's lower lip, his breath hitches on an inhale, shakes out past his lips like a gunfire rattle.

Castiel runs his hands down Dean's sides, drags a hand up over the thick line of Dean's cock in his pants so that Dean's breath catches, and then he works at the button and zipper. He pushes Dean's pants down over his hips, clumsy and eager until Dean sits back to wriggle out of them. Castiel touches him everywhere he can, running his hands over Dean's ribs, sweeping up over his chest, thumbing over one of his nipples through the fabric of his undershirt. That gets him something interesting – Dean tenses above him, and his mouth falls open, and he makes a small, shivering noise in the back of his throat. They've never had this opportunity before, to go slow, for Castiel to find what Dean really likes, rather than just getting it over with in whatever brief moments they're allowed. He does it again.

His touch is light and slow, and Dean's breath snags, his hips shifting to press his cock hard into the crease of Castiel's thigh. Castiel brings a hand up to cup the back of Dean's neck and bring him down to kiss him open-mouthed. He licks into Dean's mouth, hot and slow, and rubs his thumb harder over Dean's nipple, which gets him Dean's back arching, Dean gasping into Castiel's mouth, hips grinding forwards into Castiel's.

It sets something alight in Castiel, heat coiling around the base of his spine, and he breathes heavily as he rocks against Dean. The bed makes a noise of complaint beneath them, their combined weight shifting as they move, but Castiel doesn't care. He tilts his hips up towards Dean, wanting friction, and unconsciously he spreads his legs wider as Dean presses in closer and settles with one leg between Castiel's thighs.

He kisses Castiel, wet and obscene, tongue curling in Castiel's mouth, and Castiel's hand tightens on Dean's ribs as he drags his thumb over Dean's nipple, and then Dean is gone from him. He sits back on his heels – the bed indignant beneath them, and wobbling – and, grabbing a handful of the back of his collar, he yanks his undershirt roughly over his head. Castiel helps him, hands scrabbling to get fabric out of the way, and then unceremoniously pushing Dean's underwear down.

Dean kicks it off, and then as he comes back, Castiel palms over his skin, almost in awe. His wide shoulders, his collarbones, his broad chest and soft stomach, his flushed cock and his thighs, his hips, every inch of him hot to the touch and fucking – Jesus – freckled, with a faint pink blush building from his chest all the way up to his jaw.

Dean gets his hands under Castiel's own undershirt, shoves at it clumsily until Castiel arches up to peel it off. He gets it over his head, tosses it aside, and then Dean has ducked his head to fit his mouth to the curve of Castiel's shoulder, the crease of his collarbone, the dip of his sternum. He settles his hands on Castiel's waist and kisses him everywhere, the barest press of tongue to Castiel's skin, the scrape of teeth over his hipbone, and Castiel's breath hitches. As Dean kisses lower, mouth hot and wet, Castiel's hands come to settle on Dean's head, fingers threading through Dean's short hair, and his breath sticks in his throat.

It's too hot, too much. Castiel lifts his hips to get his underwear off, and for a second, Castiel is embarrassed by his nakedness. He wants to say something, but then Dean pins Castiel's hips down with his one hand, and with his other, Dean takes his cock in hand, pumps once, slowly. Castiel loses whatever he was planning to say. Dean thumbs under the head of Castiel's cock, and all the air feels as though it is crushed from Castiel's lungs. He can’t hold back then, his hips pulsing up into Dean’s hand, and an incoherent, wordless sound spills out of Castiel's mouth.

Dean drags his mouth back back up Castiel's body as he jerks him,

slow and tight, and Castiel uses his hands on Dean's head to drags him back up so that he can kiss him fearlessly. Castiel opens his mouth wide to let him in, and there's nothing graceful about it – the way their teeth click together, the drag and pull of tongues – Dean licking to the back of his mouth, lazy, heated, Dean taking Castiel's bottom lip between his teeth and biting down.

Heat spirals up through Castiel's veins faster than he can handle, and he gasps out loud, mouth falling shakily open, but what Castiel doesn't expect is the breathless groan that falls from Dean's mouth, the way he lowers himself to press his cock into Castiel's hip and grind against him. Dean's hand falls away from Castiel's cock, but Dean moves against him in a slow roll that sets Castiel off breathing in short bursts, sharp exhalations every time they drag and catch together. Their bodies rock together as they kiss, so that Castiel can't tell where he ends and Dean begins, and that's exactly the way he wants it.

They roll as one, every inch pressed together, and it's still not enough; Castiel's fingers dig hard enough into Dean's waist to leave marks, pulling him closer still. Dean pulls back just far enough to watch him, his gaze heated and steady, but when Castiel shamelessly ruts up into the hollow alongside Dean's cock, his eyes fall half-closed, eyelashes fluttering; something between a sigh and a moan slips out of him, a high, sharp sound. The way that Dean fits between Castiel's thighs, the need that spikes hotly in his belly every time Dean rolls his hips forwards – Castiel can't stop thinking about it, and his mouth is dry with how badly he wants and he wants.

Fear stops up Castiel's throat for a moment – they don't speak while they do this, they don't look at each other – and anxiety twists in his gut, but he swallows it down.

He takes a deep breath, and he plans what he is going to say, and he summons up strength from every reserve in his body, his toes curling as he tenses, and then he tries, "Dean--" A hot flush comes up on Castiel's jaw and throat as he hears his own voice, low and rough, but he keeps going. "Could you – I – fuck --"

Everything Castiel had decided to say leaves his brain as Dean licks over his palm and brings his hand back to Castiel's cock. All the air in Castiel's lungs is let out in one burst, and his hips buck up into the touch, and he bites down on his bottom lip to keep from making any sound. However, by that point it's too late, and he only manages to cut off the tail-end of an high, desperate noise – and Dean fucking laughs.

“Sorry – didn't get that,” Dean says, a wide grin spreading across his face, even as he jerks Castiel's cock. Castiel is trying to summon the words *fuck off* but he can't think straight with the way Dean twists his hand at the base of his cock, the way his hand tightens near the head, and Castiel is breathless.

“Please, could you – please--” Castiel says, and somehow his brain shorts out somewhere along that sentence, because he can just hear himself saying, *please, please,* and his hips are rolling up into Dean's fist.

Somehow, though, against all odds, Dean understands. The next thing Castiel sees is that Dean brings his hand up to Castiel's face, bumps his thumb along the line of Castiel's lower lip in a careful, gentle gesture that is so intimate it raises a shiver on the back of Castiel's neck, and then pushes his first two fingers into Castiel's mouth.

As Castiel sucks on Dean's fingers, Dean dips his head to press a kiss to the hollow below Castiel’s ear, his mouth then grazing slowly along the curve of his neck – dry lips snagging, parted, the wet hint of his tongue between them – to settle on his collarbone, skim further over the knob of his shoulder and he bites, carefully, so as not to leave a mark, and then licks over it. Castiel feels as though he can't breathe. Everything is impossible heat and want and urgency, and Dean's other hand is still jerking Castiel's cock, and Castiel already feels shaky with need. He curls his tongue around Dean's fingers, and Dean gasps, his body curving forwards into Castiel's as his back arches, and he presses his forehead into Castiel's neck, just below the ear. His hand stalls on Castiel's cock.

“Jesus,” Dean bursts out, and his voice is wrecked. He finally pulls his fingers from Castiel's lips, and there is a long moment where he just stares down at Castiel's open mouth. “Fuck, Cas, you--”

Castiel pulls him down into a kiss, opening his mouth wide to allow for the slide of their tongues, slow like they’ve got all the time in the world and downright filthy, no room to breathe. Under his hands, he can feel Dean's chest heave like he's been running. Dean makes a low noise in the back of his throat as he licks into Castiel's mouth, and then there are wet fingers between Castiel's legs and rubbing over his hole.

Every muscle in Castiel's body feels as though it pulls tight, and he can feel that he is already shaky. He can't keep kissing Dean; he pants against the corner of Dean's mouth and his fingers tighten into the meat of Dean's shoulders, while Dean's fingertips play over Castiel's skin. Castiel can feel his stomach muscles jumping from the effort of holding still when all he wants to do is to push back onto Dean's hand, and without meaning to, he is speaking again. “Come on, please,” he mutters against Dean's jaw, and he rolls his shoulders back into the bed to lift his hips up towards Dean. “Fuck, please, just--”

Dean pushes inside, and Castiel's words are cut off with a choked sound.

There is a long moment where Dean doesn't move, and then, slowly and incrementally, he works his finger deeper – pulling carefully out until Castiel's breath rushes out in a sigh, pressing back with Castiel's hips rising into Dean's hand. Dean pushes in to the first knuckle, his touch blunt and rough, and Castiel bites back a gasp. His whole body rocks with it, moving in a slow roll from chest to hips to meet him, tensing up every time Dean pulls back because he wants more and more and more. He wants Dean to handle him roughly, to open him up and fuck him hard enough to let him feel it in his thighs a week from now. His fingers are tight enough on Dean's back to leave bruises, and then Dean shoves back in hard.

Something like a moan breaks out of Castiel's mouth before he can stop himself, and in response, Dean's mouth falls open against Castiel's jaw, hot and wet as he breathes ragged. Castiel can feel it on his skin when Dean mouths, *fuck*, can feel the press of his tongue along the line of his neck, the hollow of his throat, and heat flares up fast and out of control all through Castiel's body. It sears under his skin, curls in his stomach, and he is so hard he can barely think straight. He can feel where their cocks are trapped between their bodies, sweaty and hot, and as he rocks his hips up into Dean's touch, he presses his cock into Dean's stomach and gasps. He reaches down between them and wraps a hand around Dean's cock.

Dean lets out a breathless groan, and his hand stutters for a second where he fucks one finger in and out of Castiel, and so Castiel uses his other hand to lift Dean's face and kiss him. He slips his tongue into Dean's mouth, sucks on his bottom lip, and then Dean pushes a second finger in.

Castiel lets all his breath out on a high, broken sound, and his back arches, his legs tightening around Dean at the same time as his hand tightens on Dean's cock, his thumb slipping over the head, and Dean makes a low noise that is obscene, something between a groan and a sigh that Castiel can feel vibrate through his chest..

“God,” Dean says, “Fuck--”

Castiel can feel a hundred different words bottlenecking inside his throat, but everything is a disorganised tangle of *I want* and *I need* and *yes, God, more, please*, that he doesn't know how to say one thing without saying them all, and he is terrified that he might tell Dean he loves him. He bites down on his bottom lip until it hurts and he tries to keep breathing, and Dean's hips are shifting to push his cock into Castiel's fist, while Dean fucks two fingers into him fast and hard until there is a sharp, white-hot need building low within Castiel. He feels desperate, everything stoked up to fever pitch until he can barely breathe and he wants--

“Fuck, I--” Castiel bursts out, and he can't stop himself. “I wish – fuck – I wish you were--”

“Yeah,” Dean says hoarsely. “Yeah, I – yeah, me too.”

Castiel barely knows what's happening except that suddenly he has his hands on Dean's shoulders and he pushes him backwards. Dean's fingers slip out of Castiel as he wobbles and then falls back onto his ass, legs sprawled, with the bed groaning beneath him at the abrupt movement, and then Castiel comes after him.

Dean says, “What--” and gets no further, because Castiel gets in between his inelegantly spread thighs, bends down, and sucks Dean's cock into his mouth.

Castiel has spent far too much time with Dean so terrified of every touch and every kiss that he could do nothing more than take what Dean would give him and then move on; too much time letting Dean grind half-heartedly into Castiel's hip while Castiel gasped and shivered and came apart. He's not doing that anymore.

Dean makes a low groan, and his hips push up into Castiel. The head of his cock hits the roof of Castiel's mouth, then the back of his throat, and there is a dizzying moment where Castiel's whole body shudders on reflex and he thinks he might throw up, but then Castiel swallows around him, which helps, and Dean breaks out with, “Jesus – fuck, I – yeah, just--”

Dean pushes his hands into Castiel's hair, his fingers tightening into fists that start up a shallow, barely-there ache as Castiel sucks, and then blossom into sharply gratifying pain as Castiel seals his mouth around the head of Dean's cock and Dean pulls hard.

Castiel pulls off for a moment to push two fingers into his mouth, and Dean says, “Oh, fuck,” in a voice that is low and strangled, and then Castiel sinks back onto Dean's cock, and he reaches those two fingers around behind him.

The angle is far from perfect – Dean can do it much better – but right now, Castiel doesn't care. He presses his wet fingers into his ass and his lips part around Dean's cock, a low noise vibrating in his throat, and Dean must feel it, because his hips pulse up into Castiel's mouth. It's been a long time since Castiel did this to himself, but he remembers how to do it, how to move slowly so that it doesn't hurt, how to curl his fingers so heat lances up fiercely through and electrifies his entire body.

“Fuck, Cas, you – Jesus, you look--” Dean becomes incoherent, a confused mixture of *yeah, yeah, fuck, keep going* and *Jesus, you look incredible* that sets off a shiver down Castiel's spine, as well as some more sounds between where Dean can't say anything except to gasp for air, and he fucks into Castiel's mouth. The roll of his hips is shaky and without rhythm, moving sloppily, and Castiel knows that he's close.

Castiel hollows his cheeks out, sucks hard until Dean makes a sound like a choked-off sob and his hands tighten in Castiel's hair. His hips stutter, snapping up faster to thrust hard into the back of Castiel's throat, where it almost hurts and Castiel can barely breathe, with Dean's cock filling his mouth and two fingers in his ass.

Dean's chest is heaving, and Castiel can see his stomach muscles shaking, and all of a sudden he has gone silent. At a glance, Castiel can see his open mouth, his face screwed up, the red flush rising up from his chest all the way up to his ears, and Dean gasps wordlessly as he trembles. His hips lift, and then Castiel feels as every muscle in Dean's body tenses, and with only the smallest, high sound, Dean comes.

Castiel chokes slightly, and come spills up over his bottom lip, but he swallows the rest, and he pulls his finger out of his ass. He wipes his sweaty, saliva-slick hand awkwardly on his thigh, straightens up, and looks over at Dean.

He has an arm thrown over his face, his face buried in his elbow, and he breathes as though he has been running a marathon.

“Dean?” Castiel says, vaguely concerned. He doesn't even care when he hears his voice, raspy and rough. He is still painfully hard, to the extent that it's difficult to concentrate – especially with the memory of Dean falling apart under his tongue at the forefront of his memory, with Dean's shaky thighs bracketing his body – but there is also anxiety churning in his gut at the idea that he might have done something wrong. “Are you--”

“Jesus fuck,” Dean says into his elbow. He sounds almost as fucked as Castiel does. “I think I went blind for a second there. Jesus.”

Castiel exhales in relief. “You're alright.”

Dean takes his arm off his face and lets it fall heavily back against the mattress. He starts laughing. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I'm alright.” He sits up and he must see something wary in Castiel's expression, because his face softens, and he holds his hands out. “Come here.”

Castiel moves inelegantly down towards him, half-crawling, until he straddles Dean's thighs, and he sits in his lap, not without uncertainty. He's never been good at this part. Usually he comes first, and then he waits for Dean to finish so that they can be done with it, but now they are touching without urgency. Dean's hand skims over Castiel's chest, over his waist, and up across his back, until Castiel shivers.

“Hey,” Dean says, so quietly that he's almost inaudible, and he palms over Castiel's bare hip. “You afraid of me now?” One corner of his mouth tilts up into a lopsided smile.

Yes, Castiel wants to say, but the words aren't coming out, and all he can think is that he is so fucking in love with Dean that he doesn't know what to do, and then Dean kisses him slowly.

It doesn't take long. Castiel has been so close for so long that when he tilts his hips forwards so that his cock rides the line of Dean's hip, he is almost instantly breathing roughly, heat sparking. Dean pulls back far enough to slip two fingers into his mouth, and then he reaches around behind Castiel and he pushes inside.

Castiel's mouth falls open a breathless sigh, and he rocks back carefully onto Dean's hand until it feels as though every nerve in his body is fizzing with the stretch and burn. He wants more, and he feels he could choke on how badly he needs to come. Dean fucks him to the first knuckle, and then starts to move faster, and Castiel can already hear a short, desperate noise spilling out of his mouth every time Dean pushes in. “Dean – Dean, I – please--”

“Yeah, I got you, I got you,” Dean says, and he tilts his head up to drag his mouth over the hinge of Castiel's jaw, over his pulse-point and down the line of his throat. Castiel can barely breathe through it because he's close, he's so fucking close that it hurts. “It's okay, I'm here, Cas, I got you--”

Castiel tangles his arms around Dean's neck and presses his forehead to Dean's temple. Both of them are sweaty and out of breath as he rides Dean's fingers, rolling down onto his hand. He gasps, and manages, “Please – please--” before the heat curling around of the base of his spine becomes too sharp and immediate for him to focus on anything except need. Dean kisses him, his mouth slick and hot,

and Castiel comes.

For a moment, Castiel is dizzy, his brain feeling distinctly disconnected from his body. Then he comes back to himself to find his face cupped in one of Dean's hands, a thumb grazing over the swell of Castiel's cheek.

A small, distant part of him panics, and he feels the need to brush Dean off, to put distance between them before he gives over too much control, but in this moment, Castiel doesn't think he could push Dean away if he wanted to.

There are splashes of cooling come on Dean's chest, and one small spot of blood on his forehead where he has accidentally pulled at his stitches; Castiel reaches up and carefully wipes it away.

Dean huffs a small laugh. “Did I fuck up my head?”

“No, you're fine,” Castiel says, feeling impossibly fond of Dean, and he smoothes his thumb, feather-light, over the injury. “You'll live.”

Dean's nose scrunches up at the end. “That your prognosis, doctor?”

Castiel feels a smile threaten at the edges of his mouth. “It is.” He is feeling bold, and so he takes a deep breath, steels himself as though for a suicide-run, and he kisses Dean's forehead. Afterwards, he averts his eyes so that he doesn't have to see the way that Dean's face lights up at the small, simple touch.

He climbs off Dean, and he rifles through the tangle of clothes on the floor in search of his underwear, with Dean commentating cheerfully

all the while.

“No, those are mine. That whole pile is mine.”

“These are not yours – look at that crease. You didn't iron that crease.”

“Uh, I can iron a perfect crease just as well as you can--”

“Bullshit. I've seen your uniform. This is mine, and that heap over there--”

“Is yours! You threw it that way. Trust me.”

Castiel mutters something inflammatory under his breath, and he at last finds his underwear. He steps into it, and he retrieves a small wash-cloth from his haversack.

He goes downstairs to his billet's small, cold wash room, and runs a faucet hat spurts unevenly and sprays cold water all over his arm. He wets the wash cloth, and he tries his hardest not to think about doing this in another setting. It would be the easiest thing in the world to imagine it – a small house, Dean sprawled sex-sleepy on the bed, Castiel wandering through the rooms in his underwear to take care of them – but he doesn't. He tightens his jaw and he doesn't pretend that this is their house, somewhere sunny, Stateside.

Castiel walks back up with the damp wash cloth, and he throws it at Dean. It's cold, and it hits Dean in the chest so that he yelps, and Castiel smiles.

“Fuckin' asshole. Why do I like you?”

Castiel shrugs as though it isn't something he has wondered himself, and he comes to sit beside Dean, now wincing as he wipes himself down with the cold cloth. Once Dean's done, he throws the wash-cloth somewhere indiscriminate and flops back onto the bed, and he looks up at Castiel in expectant silence until at last Castiel summons the courage to shut the lamp off and lie down beside him.

They struggle together for a while, trying to find a position in which they both fit comfortably on the narrow bed, and eventually Dean turns onto his side, curled away from Castiel, his knees pulled up awkwardly in front of him, and Castiel has no choice but to follow the shape of him. He moves in close behind him, his thighs tucked underneath Dean's, and carefully, he sets an arm over Dean's side. At first, it feels uncomfortable, Castiel holding back for fear of it being strange or shameful in some way, but Dean only wriggles back closer to Castiel, and he pulls the arm that Castiel has slung around him in tighter.

Castiel flattens his hand over Dean's stomach, and he feels him breathe. He buries his nose into the back of Dean's neck, his cheek tucked against the jut of Dean's shoulder-blade, and he tries to be calm. In the quiet, he can feel his heart thundering, and with his chest pressed to Dean's back, Dean must be able to feel it too. He swallows. He closes his eyes. He stops over-thinking it.

After what seems like an age of silence, Dean says, out of nowhere, “After Falmouth, I wrote to Sam.”

Castiel wasn't asleep by any means, but he wasn't alert, either. As soon as Dean begins to speak, he opens his eyes. He becomes still.

“I asked how Bill Claxton was doing,” Dean says, and his voice is

quiet, “and Sam wrote back and said, Bill's gone. They – run him and his friend out of town, and they trashed his house. Wrote things on the wall. Smashed the windows, tried to torch his car. They're gone.” Dean breathes, and his rising, falling breath underneath Castiel's hand feels as steady as ever. This is something Dean has come to terms with. “And then Sammy said, *why do you wanna know*, and he asked if everything was okay, and, uh. That was when I realised I could never take this home with me.”

Beneath Castiel's hand, Dean's stomach lifts as he inhales, exhales. Under Castiel's hand, the act feels easy. Out loud, Castiel can hear the heaviness in it, as though to merely exist is exhausting.

“That a man like that, back in Kansas, is a dead man, and then I figured – if anything was ever gonna happen, it could only happen here. Now.” Dean's fingers play over Castiel's, distracted. “On the front line of the biggest war the world's ever seen, where everybody's too much just trying to stay alive to notice me – here, I could do it. I could get away with it.”

Castiel doesn't know what to say. He is well-used to only having significant conversations when he can get away with not looking at Dean; he has it almost down to fine art. Now, with Dean facing the other way, Castiel wants to reach out to him and can't.

“For a while, that's how it was. I was – I don't know. Getting it out of my system, I guess.” Dean is quiet for a long moment. Then, at last, he says, “It's not like that anymore.”

There is no answer Castiel can give to that which wouldn't just be hollow. He knows how it is to wish and wish that one day the fantasies would stop, and that he would look at a woman and be drawn to her hips and breasts the way he is drawn to the breadth of Dean's shoulders. Silently, Castiel tightens his arm around Dean's waist, and he lets Dean press back against his chest.

30 th October, 1944

When Castiel wakes up at oh-three-hundred as usual, it takes him a minute or so to realise that Dean is not on the bed with him.

By now, he is well-used to not being able to sleep. It's not always the nightmares, the debilitating wave of pure terror that hits him on waking to leave him soaked in a cold sweat and shaking. Sometimes he simply gets into bed and finds that all the day's bone-numbing exhaustion has abruptly bled away, so that he lies wide-awake staring at the ceiling, with all his worries spinning fast and dizzy through his mind; sometimes he simply can't get comfortable, and wakes every half hour from restless sleep, unable to settle in a real bed after so long on concrete and in foxholes. Even this bed, with the mattress worn thin, is disconcertingly soft.

Castiel squirms, pushing his shoulders back into the bed slats as though by force he might make it more resistant, and then he turns over, and that's when he remembers Dean.

Castiel sits up.

Dean is no longer beside him, and a heavy darkness has fallen over the room. The light discipline regulations in Brunssum means that there is not even the dim glow of lamplight from the street to filter through the curtains. Castiel is utterly alone.

Disappointed but not surprised, he supposes that it makes sense than Dean would want to go back to his own barracks, or to ensure that his cover story is secure, even if that means waking up in the bushes somewhere. It's purely strategic; it's what Castiel would do.

He swings his feet out of bed, and he touches something warm and solid on the floor.

For a second, Castiel is taken aback, recoiling, and then as his eyes slowly adjust to the dark, he sees: there is Dean, curled up on the hard floor, fast asleep.

He has one arm curved out in front of him, hand closed into a fist. His shoulder tilts over towards the ground as though protecting something tucked underneath him. Castiel recognises the position. It's the way Dean sleeps in the field, his first-aid kit close to his body to keep it safe and on-hand, the strap of his musette bag clenched in his fist so that he's ready to move.

Castiel sits on the edge of his bed and looks at him. He watches Dean breathe, his shoulders shifting as he lets out a small snore, and when fondness pulls within Castiel's chest, this time the undercurrent of fear alongside is only a small, flickering thing, like a single match alongside the sunlight. He breathes in this moment, the quiet and stillness of it, and just for a moment, he lets himself imagine it. The two of them.

He swallows.

Castiel stands up, carefully steps around Dean, and moves towards where his haversack and webbing are propped against the wall. He digs into the pouch of his webbing until he comes up with a flashlight, his paper, and the crooked stub of a pencil, and then he moves back in the direction of his bed. Before he reaches it, though, he changes his mind; he steps in close to Dean, and then he eases himself down to sit on the floor beside him, his back against the the bed-frame.

He settles cross-legged in the dark, his knee bumping the back of Dean's thigh, and he resists the urge to smooth his hand over Dean's

hip. Instead, he turns his flashlight on, angling the beam away from Dean so as not to disturb him. He props his paper against his leg, and he picks up his pen.

Dear Mrs. Wallace--

He takes a deep breath, and he writes.

Chapter 15: Setterich

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the long wait. By the way, there is some stuff to do with suicide in this chapter that might get a little too intense for people, so if you think that you might be triggered by that, then please skip the very last section dated the 21st of November!! I'll summarise what happens in that scene at the end of the chapter so that you can read around it. Stay safe!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1st November, 1944

Dear Sam,

Still no sign of dad – are you serious? Jesus. He'll be fine. He'll show up. He always does. You tell me when you hear, although I don't know how regular I'll be writing, since we'll be moving out soon into Germany, proper. I figure I'm allowed to write that in letters – it ain't exactly gonna be breaking news to Krauts if they intercept the mail, since we're already knocking on their front fucking door. We took one big city already and apparently now we're onto to the next, but I can't say much more. And no, it won't be that dangerous. I swear, okay, the Tiger wasn't that big a deal. I made it sound scary to impress Jessica, but honestly there was like a hundred of us and thirty of them, and we got the Tiger taken out pretty fast since we had a bazooka and a couple mines with us. It wasn't that big a deal, so quit worrying. And it wasn't even the tank that got me in the head. Just a stray piece of metal I got in the way of, so yeah, laugh it up. I wasn't really even in danger. Don't tell that Jess, though. Keep her thinking I'm brave and wild and all daring-do, so when I get back home she knows to go for the better-looking brother.

But seriously, how you intend to keep a girl like that when you keep pulling these dumbbell stunts is beyond me – I showed your story to all the guys and Joe thought you had to be kidding. He said nobody's that fucking stupid, and I had to say, well, you're wrong there. I'm related to the one guy in the universe dumb enough to get his goddamn arm trapped in a

goddamn ice-cream truck. Good on Jess for not taking you seriously. I wouldn't have rescued you either, dumbass. Anyway, at least C--[redacted] Novak thought it was funny – I mean, I'm pretty sure he also thinks you're an idiot, but he smiled, which is pretty rare in itself, so at least you totally embarrassing yourself wasn't for nothing!

That reminds me, he said the goddamn funniest thing the other day. We were getting our rations resupplied, and we were all queued up waiting to get our hands on, and Novak was up the front talking to the supply guys doing all the admin, and this one staff sergeant says – wait, I forgot to say, we'd been out on a patrol all that afternoon, and only just come back in, and it was raining and we were tired, so I guess we looked like crap. And this staff sergeant, he says, "Long day, sir?" and Novak says, "All days are twenty-four hours long" and I swear to God – okay, so it doesn't sound so funny when I write it down. It's partly he's got such a shitty sense of humour, right, I mean honest to God, his jokes suck, but the way he tells them, all straight-faced and serious, somehow it's hilarious. I don't know, maybe you had to be there. But it was a gas. Reminds me of this other time, last week or so, someone was telling a joke – I think it was Don – and it went, 'what do you call a man with no head who goes out driving his automobile on the highway' and we didn't even realise Novak was listening, but he comes past and goes, "Improbable, mostly". Jesus. It's in the way he says it, trust me.

Anyway, good to hear you're feeling a little better now, and quit sticking your giant freaking arms in things they don't belong. I don't care if you're retrieving Jess' bracelet or rescuing a kitten. Keep your hands out of trucks, for God's sake. You write as soon as you hear from dad, and you take care – of yourself and of her. Or else. Charlie and Joe say hi, by which I mean they encourage you to do terrible things to Jess, so I'll leave it at hi. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

4th November, 1944

“Twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight--” Sergeant Garrigan calls out the timings loud and fast, pacing the length of the company's front rank as they sweat and pant and drop. Castiel is down in the dirt with the rest of them, stones digging into his palms as he drives himself into press-up after press-up.

Baker Company are out of shape, the months of combat too hectic for calisthenics, and then made lazy by their time on reserve. Castiel has a dull burning in his bad shoulder, but he grits his teeth and ignores it, calling out the timing with everyone else.

“--thirty-four, thirty-five – come on, Zeddmore, get your fucking hips up, you're kissing the ground, not making love to it--” A breathless titter of laughter lifts from the men, cut off sharply when Garrigan snaps, “I don't know what the fuck you're laughing at, half of you are as bad as he is – hold!”

Castiel freezes where he is, arms half-bent, face three inches from the ground. His arm have only just started up aching, but the burn in his shoulder has built to a throbbing pain that shoots daggers down to his elbow, makes his fingers cramp. He breathes through his teeth.

“And up,” Garrigan calls out. “Thirty-nine – forty--”

By the time they hit fifty, Castiel can feel sweat plaster his undershirt to the dip of his shoulders and the small of his back. By sixty-two, he is shaking.

He clenches his jaw until his teeth hurt, and stubbornly keeps calling out, *sixty-four, sixty-five, sixty-six.*

On seventy, his arm buckles.

Castiel hits the ground shoulder-first, a sharp burst of pain momentarily blurring his vision, and then he has a faceful of mud, and somebody starts laughing at him.

“Good going, lieutenant,” Hester calls, at his left in rank.

“Thank you,” Castiel says, thinly veiled irritation in his voice, as he picks himself up. He sits back on his heels, and gingerly he stretches out his bad arm, shaking out a vibrating sensation like pins and needles.

At the front of the company, Garrigan glances over towards Castiel as he continues to call out *seventy-two, seventy-three*, but he doesn't comment. Luckily, it doesn't seem to have been too widely noticed, and Castiel can see other men further down the line slipping in the mud to fall on their faces as well.

In the space of a few days, the weather has turned for the worse. The sky is heavy and cramped with cloud, the mornings bleak, the afternoons rumbling with the threat of rain. This morning, for the first time, Castiel caught sight of his own breath coldly curling. He rubs his grimy hands together and considers the likelihood of getting any productive answer if he asks battalion staff about cold weather gear again.

He hauls himself up onto his feet and moves along the line, checking form, offering words of encouragement. He checks that Lance Corporal Miller is okay when his hand slips out from underneath in the mud and he nearly falls down, and he finds Dean towards the end of two-platoon, solidly planted as he drops and pushes himself up, ninety-two times, ninety-three, ninety-four.

Dean glances up as Castiel pauses beside him, cheeks flushed with exertion. He only makes eye-contact for a split-second before he has to drop his head and concentrate, but it's long enough for his mouth to tilt up into a crooked smile. Castiel presses his lips tightly together to keep from echoing it, but he does linger a moment longer to eye the thickness of his biceps, the flex and pull of Dean's shoulders as he works, before he turns away. He's only human.

After press-ups, Garrigan leads them in a five-mile run, and that's just fine for Castiel. He can fit into place alongside the front rank of his company and run without thinking. He lets himself fall into step with the men, and he relaxes into the regular drumming of the pace being set by the slower replacements at the front. Further behind him, he can hear a tuneless rendition of *For Me And My Gal,* and he's fairly sure he can hear Ash Lowell shouting out Gene Kelly's obnoxious spoken lines over the top, while there are a multitude of voices in the heart of two-platoon breathlessly debating whether or not Kelly is a creep in that movie.

They hit the three-mile mark and wheel an awkward about-turn around a solitary lamp-post that flickers dimly in the thinning light, just as Bradbury calls out, his voice as smooth and charming as Kelly's, “You remember this one?” and there is a burst of laughter from further back in the marching order.

“And this!” There's Dean, voice pitched higher than usual to mimic Judy Garland, and a little choked, like maybe he's trying not to laugh, and there is an uproar of shouting and laughter from the back.

Castiel half-turns his head as he runs. “There better not be tap-dancing going on back there,” he calls over his shoulder.

“Sir, you got no idea--”

“Wouldn't dream of it, lieutenant,” Dean calls forwards, with that guilty edge to his voice that suggests that's exactly the stunt he was pulling mid-run, and Castiel can only roll his eyes.

“Aww, but sir, doesn't he make a beautiful Judy--”

Dean says, “Better-looking, I think.”

“Does this mean I'm losing my candidacy for Best Tits in the 29th?” Harvelle asks, and Dean lets out the ugliest bark of laughter that Castiel has ever heard.

Castiel can't help himself; he smiles.

When at last they come back into Eygelshoven, Castiel stands them to attention and congratulates them on having made good time – thirty-one minutes for five miles when he allowed them thirty-five – before he dismisses them to change back into their combats and return to their billets. As they head off, Castiel can hear a few grumbling about the lack of showers, but he pays it no attention; they should be grateful that they are still in reserve and not back out in the field. It could be a lot worse.

He watches his men filter off down the street in search of the various hollowed-out and abandoned buildings where they are stationed for the night, and he reaches a hand back over his shoulder to press tentative fingers into the muscle around the scar tissue of his old shrapnel wound. He presses in, wincing, until the old pain dims into an ache.

“Hey. You okay, lieutenant?”

Castiel lifts his head, surprised, to find Dean approaching with a frown on his face. For a moment, Castiel doesn't understand, and then Dean nods at Castiel's arm contorting itself to rub some of the strain out.

“Oh. Fine,” Castiel says, and he rolls his shoulders back until they pop, tilts his neck over to one side. “Just – my shoulder.”

“You want me to take a look at that?”

Castiel looks at him, eyebrows arched. It wouldn't be the most subtle way that Dean's ever made a pass at him, but it wouldn't necessarily be the least, either.

Dean breaks out into a grin. “No, I mean – seriously. If it hurts.”

“No, I'm alright.” It doesn't hurt anymore than it usually does. It was just the press-ups that strained the damaged muscle around his shrapnel scar; he'll live. “But – thank you.”

“Well, if you're sure,” Dean says with a shrug. “I mean, I have been told I have magic fingers, so...”

Castiel can't resist the innuendo, and he can feel his mouth lift into a smirk.

Dean bursts out laughing, and then he rocks back onto his heels, hands held out as though in surrender. “Whoa, whoa. Now who's being inappropriate?” His voice turns scandalised. “Sir, I thought better of you.”

“That was a poor decision on your part, then.”

Dean shakes his head, his grin wide as ever.

Castiel glances ruefully over his shoulder in the direction of the command post, all at once not wanting to leave Dean and painfully aware that he has a lot he needs to do. He sighs. “Alright, I have to go to company CP.” He looks back towards Dean. “Which way are you headed?”

“Battalion aid station, actually.”

“Okay.” It's the same direction as the CP. Castiel hesitates. “Do you want to – walk?”

A small smile lifts one corner of Dean's mouth. “Lieutenant, I thought you'd never ask,” he says, his voice a teasing drawl as though Castiel has propositioned him for much more. They set off together, side by side underneath the darkening evening, the lamplight dim and butter-yellow over the cobblestones. It is growing colder now, Castiel chilly without his combat jacket. “Hey,” Dean goes on, voice turning triumphant, “speaking of injuries. Guess who got their Purple Heart yesterday?”

“Really?” Castiel raises his eyebrows, and he glances pointedly at the pink ridge of Dean's scar where it cuts through his hairline. “For that?”

Dean makes an indignant noise of protest. “Hey, fuck you, sir. I got injured.”

“You didn't even go to hospital,” Castiel points out.

“I did!” Dean exclaims, and he pushes at Castiel. His hand is warm on Castiel's bare arm. “I got sent back to the aid station, remember? Had to make sure my brain wasn't gonna come out.”

Castiel can feel a slow-starting smile on his lips. “They'd be hard-pressed to find any.”

“Ha-ha.” Dean shoots him a withering look. “Anyway, an injury's an injury, isn't it? They aren't picky with their medals. How many Purple Hearts do you even have?”

“Just the one,” Castiel says.

“You serious?”

Dead-pan, Castiel meets his eyes as they walk. “Apparently, knocking myself out on the sidewalk doesn't count.”

Dean laughs again. Castiel looks over at him, his own smile widening instinctively in response, and he wants badly to kiss him. It would be the easiest thing in the world, to reach out for him and pull him in close. The street is empty, and the buildings on either side are quiet – they could probably get away with it.

Castiel takes a deep breath, and he casts about for a topic of conversation on neutral ground. He doesn't kiss him, and he doesn't ask about Sam, or about how Dean is feeling now that they are

preparing to go back into combat. He doesn't look for too long at the line of his jaw, the shape of his mouth, the way his eyes crinkle up at the corners when he squints in the lamplight. He says, “So. How are supplies looking?”

Dean lets out his breath between his teeth. “Doing okay,” he says. “I got extra morphine and bandages from the aid station at Eygelshoven, but me and the guys are pretty short on sulfa powder at the minute. That, and Nolan keeps losing his needle so it's currently standing at two needles between three guys – so if more than two people need stitches, they're gonna have to form a queue.”

Castiel nods. Unfortunately, there haven't been many resupplies since they moved this far north. The last Castiel heard, the Allies were trying to clear a route through Antwerp to get supplies to the men in Germany, but if they've succeeded, Castiel doesn't know anything about it. All he knows is that he's been running off the same three clips for the past four weeks, and they've been warned by battalion that in the weeks to come they might have to ration themselves to two meals a day in order to make food last longer.

“I'll see what I can do,” Castiel says.

“Don't worry about it,” Dean replies. “I know we're waiting on a supply run. It'll come in when it comes in. I don't want you to get your ass kicked again by battalion on my behalf.”

Castiel squints at him. “Who says I'm going to get my ass kicked?” he says, trying to work out whether to be insulted that Dean thinks he regularly gets dressed-down by his superiors. Then: “And what do you mean, *again*?”

“Uh,” Dean says, which isn't remotely suspicious. “I guess – never mind.”

“What?”

“Look, I shouldn't have--”

“Winchester,” Castiel says warningly.

Dean sighs. He pushes his hands into the pockets of his combats. “Charlie overheard when Major Singer spoke to you about – uh, neglecting your interpersonal responsibilities.”

Castiel stops walking. Ever since Aachen, battalion staff have been stressed to snapping points, worrying about the start of Operation Queen, so there have been a few times where Major Everett have called him and the other CCOs in to be reprimanded – for not performing weapons' checks frequently enough, for not patrolling aggressively enough, for communications issues on the radios, for every minor infraction – but of course, knowing Castiel's luck, it would be this.

A step ahead of him, Dean turns back. “Sorry. I shouldn't have mentioned it.”

“Bradbury shouldn't have been listening,” Castiel says. His chest feels heavy, and all that he can summon to suppress it is irritation, but he doesn't know where to direct it, when all the blame is squarely on his shoulders. “Bradbury shouldn't have told you.”

“It was an accident,” Dean says.

“He accidentally told you?”

Dean rolls his eyes, tipping his head forwards. “Okay, that part was on purpose.” His mouth twists sheepishly. “Sorry.”

Castiel lets out his breath slowly. “It's fine,” he says eventually. “Anyway, you already knew the extent of my... negligence.”

Dean jerks his shoulders in a lazy approximation of a shrug, hands still in his pockets. Castiel notes to himself that Dean doesn't answer – he doesn't say that it's okay, or that Castiel did the right thing in the end, or any meaningless consolation. Dean's the one who snapped at Castiel about taking too long to write the letter in the first place; he won't make any excuses for Castiel now.

Instead, Dean says, “You heard anything back?”

“No.” Castiel glances past Dean in the direction of company CP, now visible at the end of the street, with Lieutenant Hester speaking to an unfamiliar officer from Dog Company on the front step. “I probably won't for some time. She'll need to process it.”

Dean nods. “She'll be alright,” he says, after a moment. “She just needs time.”

Castiel doesn't answer. He doesn't feel as though he has any right to comment upon that. He is, in part, the reason Eleanor Wallace's son is dead. He is entirely the reason why she has only now found out, a month after the fact. He goes on looking past Dean, and that is when he catches sight of a large brown cat weaving slowly through the rubble.

This isn't the first time he's seen the cat. It lives somewhere around here, and so he keeps bumping into it on his way through town. It isn't exactly as though he minds; truth be told, he sometimes looks for it on his way back and forth from company CP.

He drops into a crouch and holds out his hand.

Dean raises his eyebrows. “What are you doing?” he asks, baffled, and then he glances behind to follow Castiel's gaze, and when he sees the cat, he lets out a low laugh. “Where the hell did that thing come from?”

The cat is determinedly ignoring Castiel. “He lives in one of these houses,” Castiel says. “I've seen him a few times.”

“Huh.” Dean considers this, watching Castiel lose all dignity as he tries to get the cat's attention. “I gotta say, you sound pretty familiar.” His voice turns gently patronising. “Did you made a new friend, lieutenant?”

“Fuck off,” Castiel says mildly, to which Dean starts laughing. Then, as an afterthought, Castiel adds, “His name is Bonaparte.”

“Bonaparte,” Dean repeats incredulously. “You're fucking with me.”

“The brass want us to push across the Rhine,” Castiel says. “No invading army has succeeded in pushing that far into German territory in a hundred years. The last military force to do so was under Napoleon.” At last, the cat is tempted and creeps within arms' reach; Castiel, sitting back on his heels, stretches far enough to just about scratch the top of the cat's head. “I believe we could benefit from having something of Napoleon on our side. Hi, there.”

“This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen,” Dean says, his grin spreading wider and wider until the corners of his eyes crease up. “I can't believe it. Lieutenant Novak is nuts about cats – no-one is gonna believe this.”

As though on cue, the cat ducks away from Castiel's hand and makes a speedy retreat through the rubble. “I'm not nuts about cats,” he objects as he straightens up. “Everyone likes cats.”

“Not me,” Dean says, and he sneezes.

Castiel looks at him. “You're allergic,” he accuses.

Dean wipes his nose with the back of his hand. “Guilty as charged. It's okay. Cats are allergic to me, too.” He shrugs, nonchalant. “I always thought it'd be kind of cool to have a fish, though.”

Without thinking, Castiel says, “We are not getting a fish.”

Dean looks at him, and his expression is something complicated that Castiel can't quite read – something surprised and soft and sad and warm and bewildered – and Castiel's gut clenches. What the fuck is wrong with him? He shouldn't have said that; he's a fucking idiot; why the fuck would he ever make any kind of implication that he's thought about them in the long run, maybe making it back home – but it's alright. Dean recovers almost instantly, and he laughs it off.

His mouth tilts up into a small smile, and he says, “Really? That's the final straw for you?”

“Well,” Castiel says, and he wants fervently to keep this light-hearted, but he is so anxious about the right thing to say in order to keep this careless humour going that he doesn't know what to say next, and so he trails off uselessly and the conversation creaks to an agonising halt.

Dean looks over at him, and Castiel has nothing to say. They find themselves just looking at each other, and Castiel knows they are both thinking about it. Whether it's possible.

Slowly, Dean's smile fades.

Castiel looks away, and he clears his throat. “Anyway, there's company CP,” he says awkwardly. “I should--”

“Yeah,” Dean says. He lifts a hand to scratch at the back of his head. “Me too. To the aid station, I mean. Not--”

“Not the CP. You have somewhere else to be. So do I.” Castiel isn't making any sense, and every aspect of this is uncomfortable. “I'll see you--”

“Yeah, I'll see you later.” They are talking over each other. “I'll--”

“See you.” Castiel takes a deep breath, and he gives a curt nod, meeting Dean's eyes only briefly, and then he moves past him towards company CP. He has a lot he needs to do – sand tables to build, maps to review, intelligence to study, reports to look over. He doesn't have time to analyse the way Dean looked at him when he made the mistake of implying that maybe this could last.

November 5th, 1944

There is blood on his hands.

Fuckin' butcher, Cas – don't--

Castiel wakes up gasping for air like he’s drowning. He sits upright, sweat all slick down his back and over his chest, his clothes sticking to him, and for several minutes he just sits there in the silence and struggles to catch his breath back while his heart drums wildly out of control.

He breathes slowly, counting the seconds in and out, in and out again, in and out. He closes his eyes. He can’t relax, though; every muscle in his body is pulled tight and tense, as though he’s expecting at any moment to have to get up and run for his life - and he’s shaking.

He breathes in through his nose; out through his mouth; he counts to ten. When he’s still on edge at ten, he goes on to twenty, and then thirty. When he reaches one hundred, he rubs a hand across his forehead in an attempt to clear some of the sweat sitting thick and heavy on his skin, and he pushes his hair back from his face.

Rain is drumming off his bivouac, dripping fast and steady off the corners to wet his field blanket and his webbing. Castiel doesn't want to be dramatic, but he's pretty sure that this is the worst conditions they've lived through since they arrived in France – including when they slept in dry dirt shell scrapings barely a foot deep off Omaha Beach. If this is what being on reserve is like, he can't help feeling he rather be on the front line. They are set up in foxholes along the land past Eygelshoven – staying alert, *just in case*, according to Major Singer – which grow increasingly waterlogged with every passing day as the unrelenting rain comes down.

Castiel's rifle, where he has it tucked into his side, is bitterly cold to the touch. Out of instinct or some routine of self-comfort, he picks it up and pulls the cocking handle back to check it: empty; clear. He snaps the handle forwards and lowers the rifle to his lap. He is still fighting to breathe.

The time, when he fumbles for his flashlight to check his watch, is just after oh-three-hundred hours. He's been asleep for little more than an hour.

He drags himself out of his bivouac, stumbling a little in the thick mud as he gets to his feet, and he fits his helmet to his head. He doesn't bother with the chinstraps, but leaves them swinging, and he heads off through the dark.

Baker Company is still and quiet but for the sound of the rain. They aren't on-duty at the moment, but the men are happy to wait in tactical readiness – with the exception of the terrible weather, mostly they don't mind the light and noise discipline as long as they aren't getting shot at. They get to sleep longer; the sentries are allowed to be slightly less vigilant. Castiel can hear a murmur of muted conversation from sentry point two, which, technically, means an infraction of noise discipline for which he should admonish them, but he decides to turn a deaf ear to it. Being out for two hours in the pouring rain at oh-three-hundred is punishment enough.

A few foxholes stir sleepily as Castiel passes, but the majority pay him no mind. He walks the length of the harbour area until his hands stop shaking. His fingers grow clumsy with cold on his M1, held loosely level with his hip. He walks the length again, back the way he came, until he is calm, and then he makes his way towards one-platoon.

He ducks his head under low-hanging branches, stepping carefully through the undergrowth through what sparse light he is afforded by the thin grey moonlight that filters through the leaves overhead. He knows where he is going. He has mentally traced these steps a

thousand times in his head already in the few days that they have been here, as he weighed up the merits versus the consequences, as he tried to ascertain whether it was worth the risk. For now, he is too tired, too shaken by the lingering threads of terror that clutched at him in the night, to care about consequences.

When Castiel reaches the right foxhole, he hesitates at the mouth and squints in. He can only see one body down there. It looks about the right size.

He doesn't announce himself; he just climbs in. Underneath a stretched waterproof jacket and a shelter-half, the rain is drumming.

At the bottom of the foxhole, Dean is curled over onto his side, his medical bag tucked close to his chest. Castiel means to get across to him with more subtlety, but his boots sink into the thick mud at the bottom of the foxhole, and he slips as he tries to get over towards Dean, ending up half on top of him with a handful of his jacket.

Dean mumbles out a bleary noise, lifting his head, and he says, “Now?”

“No,” Castiel says quietly, even as one of Dean's hands grope blindly for his webbing, ready to move out onto sentry. “Sorry. Just me.”

There is a moment where Dean is frozen, and Castiel can almost hear him processing as he tries to drag himself out of sleep – he's not being called to sentry – he doesn't have to be awake – but someone is here – and then, at last, he relaxes. Softly, he says, “Cas?”

“Yeah.”

Dean reaches out a steadying hand to Castiel's waist; the other curls into his sleeve where Castiel is clutching Dean's jacket to keep from slipping down into the mud. Dean says, “Hey,” around a yawn.

“You were sleeping,” Castiel says apologetically. “I didn't mean to wake you.”

He feels Dean's laugh more than he hears it, a huff of air against the side of his face. Dean lifts a hand to Castiel's face, slides it up into Castiel's hair to steer his head around so that Dean can speak into his ear, mouth grazing the corner of Castiel's jaw. “Yeah, you did.”

Castiel smiles, embarrassment coming up hot on his ears. “Yeah, I did.” He leans in close, and whispers, “I thought you were sharing?”

“Paired with Joe, but he's on sentry for an hour and a half.”

Castiel considers this. “And your sentry?”

“Actually, I'm not even on sentry tonight.” Against his skin, Castiel feels the slow curve of Dean's smile. “I think my CO must have a soft spot for me.”

Castiel turns his head and kisses him. Dean tastes stale, like bad coffee and tobacco, but his lips are warm and soft, and when he opens his mouth for the lazy heat of his tongue, it ignites a dull warmth low in Castiel's stomach. Dean pulls himself upright to sit on his heels with his back against the foxhole wall, slips his hand up under Castiel's combat jacket, skates over his hip and up his side. Their noses bump.

The waterproofing overhead doesn't entirely reach the breadth of the

foxhole, and so rainwater comes dripping off the edges, catching on the rim of Castiel's helmet, stinging coldly against his skin as it falls inside the collar of his jacket. Castiel tilts his head up to press into Dean, capturing his bottom lip, opening his mouth for a slow slide of tongue. He steadies himself with a hand on the dirt wall at Dean's back, mud squelching uncomfortably between his fingers.

Dean shifts his weight from the balls of his feet until he half-squats, half-kneels, his hand on Castiel's waist pulling him in closer – but then one of Castiel's feet skids out underneath him where the bottom of the foxhole is near enough waterlogged, and he falls heavily against Dean with a muffled noise.

Dean laughs. “Easy,” he murmurs, and he goes on to be decisively unhelpful by grabbing a handful of Castiel's ass.

Castiel gasps in surprise, jolting against Dean, and he wants to tell Dean to stop being a dick, but he's hyper-aware of their proximity to the other foxholes, and he doesn't trust himself not to be overheard. Instead, he slides his hand down over Dean's thigh and presses his palm against Dean's cock.

Dean lets out a slow sigh, and Castiel can feel Dean's cock filling against his hand, thickening into a solid line inside his combats. Castiel uses his other hand to get underneath Dean's combat jacket, and he skims his hand up over Dean's stomach, his ribs, to graze over Dean's nipple through the thin fabric of his undershirt.

It's near-instant: Dean melts underneath Castiel, his body pliant, and his hips tilt up unconsciously into Castiel's touch. His hand tightens on Castiel's ass, and in the complete darkness, Castiel can't see his face, but he can feel Dean's cock twitch against his palm when he drags his thumb over Dean's nipple again, and he can hear when Dean's breath catches.

Castiel aches to be closer, to taste him, to suck him down and let him fuck roughly into Castiel's mouth. There isn't the time or space for that now, though. Castiel fumbles for the zipper of Dean's pants, fingers clumsy in the dark. He works Dean's pants open, wipes his hand on the front of his own jacket – to little avail, since it's as equally damp and grubby as everything else stuck out in the rain – and he pushes his hand down into Dean's underwear.

A shivering breath hisses out between Dean's teeth, and Dean's weight moves indistinctly in the dark, adjusting, until Castiel realises that he has shrugged out of his webbing, and when Castiel leans forwards to kiss Dean, he finds the line of his throat exposed, his head tipped back to rest against the wall of the foxhole. Castiel licks over Dean's pulse point, drags his mouth up along the tendon to scrape his teeth at the hinge of his jaw. Dean's breath hitches. Castiel bumps his knuckles over Dean's cock, turns his hand over to thumb at the head, rubbing just underneath, and one of Dean's hands comes up blindly groping at Castiel's jacket to haul him in closer.

Castiel lets himself be yanked in until he is awkwardly straddling one of Dean's thighs but then Dean reaches up, his hands cupping the back of Castiel's head until his helmet, with the chinstrap unclipped, falls half over his eyes. Dean uses that grip on Castiel to pull him up until their faces are level, and Dean kisses him open-mouthed.

Already, with the rain trickling off the edges of the shelter-half, Dean's hair is damply flattened to his head. Castiel pushes his free hand backwards through it until it all sticks up, unruly wet spikes, curls his fingers into it. Everything in his body feels fizzing with how he wants Dean, slow and sparking. He closes his other hand around Dean's cock and jacks him once, slow.

Dean's mouth slackens against Castiel's as he takes a deep breath. His fingers tighten where he holds onto Castiel, one hand fit warmly to his jaw, the other gentle at the back of his head. His hips shift, tiny abortive rocking movements as Castiel starts to move his hand in earnest, and he kisses slowly, distractedly. One moment he pushes his tongue into Castiel's mouth; the next, he pulls just far enough to tilt

his forehead against Castiel's as he gasps and sighs and swallows down the small noise that rises in his throat.

The storm goes on rattling off the canvas, beating up a dull rhythm, and so the slick sound of Dean's cock slipping through Castiel's fist is lost. They keep absolutely silent, and for the first time, Castiel regrets it. He wants to hear Dean swear and moan, wants to hear the way his voice turns high and rough at the edges when he gets close, the stuttering way he rasps out *Cas, Cas*.

Castiel licks into Dean's mouth, sucks Dean's lower lip gently between his teeth. He works his hips down into Dean's thigh, his cock trapped into his combats still, and the friction sends sparks skittering up his spine. Dean lowers a hand back to Castiel's ass, using his grip to pull Castiel forwards against him until he can grind his cock into Dean's hip.

Breathlessly, Castiel tips Dean's head over so that he can press his mouth to Dean's ear, and he whispers, “If you leave an incriminating mud hand print on my ass, I'll shoot you.”

Dean bursts out laughing – too loud – but the sound of it is all at once so honey-warm and so ridiculous, with a half-snort tacked onto the end, that Castiel feels a smile spread across his face, and he doesn't have to heart to chastise him to be quieter. Instead, he tightens his fingers on Dean's cock, jerking him faster. He sweeps his thumb over the head of Dean's cock, rubbing at the underside of it until Dean makes a choked-off noise against Castiel's cheek, and he drops his head back again.

Castiel can feel Dean's chest rise and fall as he fights for breath; he lifts a hand to Dean's face, feeling in the dark until his thumb grazes over the swell of Dean's lower lip, his open mouth gasping, his tongue tucked into the corner of his lip. He's close, and Castiel can't stop himself.

He pulls away from Dean, slipping on his knees in his dirt, and he ducks down to suck Dean's cock into his mouth.

Dean's hips jerk reflexively, the head of his cock hitting the roof of Castiel's mouth in a way that makes Castiel's eyes water, and a low, winded noise breaks out of him. Castiel hollows his cheeks as Dean thrusts unevenly up into Castiel's mouth, once, twice. His chest heaves, and one hand scrabbles clumsily at Castiel's shoulder, fingers trembling, and then his cock twitches in Castiel's mouth. He comes over Castiel's tongue, every muscle in his body going taut and then all at once slackening.

Castiel swallows, and he pulls off slowly, and then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

He sits back, and he doesn't even have time to catch his breath before Dean reaches across to kiss him, one hand moving to cup the back of Castiel's neck. Dean's lips are soft, relaxed, and the press of his tongue is all languid heat. There is electricity under Castiel's skin as Dean presses against him, pushes and pushes until Castiel falls back against the other side of the foxhole. Dean settles between his splayed thighs.

Castiel feels more than he sees Dean – a hand on each of his thighs, slowly pushing up from knee to pelvis, thumbs brushing the in-seam of his combats; fingers skimming over the line of Castiel's erection until Castiel's hips jerk; fingers at the button and zipper, spreading his fly wide to reach in and fit his hand to Castiel's cock.

Dean is too far for Castiel to touch properly, knelt between Castiel's thighs, and so Castiel balls his hands into fists at his sides. Someone in a foxhole down the line sneezes; the rain goes on pattering off their makeshift roof, and Dean starts jacking Castiel in a careful, steady rhythm that makes Castiel's breath snag in his throat.

Castiel feels exposed like this, his hips rocking up to fuck into Dean's hand, every nerve in his body feeling stripped raw as he tries to get more, more. Unable to touch Dean, to kiss him, too wrecked to do anything but lie back dizzy and let Dean work.

He wraps his hand around Dean's where he jacks Castiel's cock, and he pushes at him, tries to make him go faster. He can't speak to say, *please, please, Dean, touch me*, and so Dean goes slow, and Castiel throws his head back, mouth open, to drag in deep breaths as heat flares all through him.

Dean's fingers loosen near the head of Castiel's cock, tighten on the descent, and it's not enough. Castiel feels as though he's burning up with need, his hips rolling desperately into every touch, and he is breathless. Then Dean's hand stops for a moment, pushes lower to roll Castiel's balls in his palm, to rub his thumb over the space just behind, and Castiel's thighs tighten to press in on Dean's hips. He's so hard it hurts, and he feels strung out and thin, urgently wanting.

There is a shaky, low noise struggling in his throat as the heat builds, and then Dean claps his free hand over Castiel's mouth to muffle any sound, and Castiel, breathing ragged against Dean's palm, starts mouthing. He gasps silently into Dean's hand, *yes, yes, keep going, fuck, just like that*, and he swears and he blasphemes and he tells him it's perfect.

Dean shifts his weight until he has a knee pressed up hard underneath Castiel's balls, bearing forwards so that Castiel can feel Dean's hipbones against the backs of his thighs, and every time Castiel moves to fuck into Dean's fist, the friction is overwhelming.

Everything in Castiel narrows down to the touch of Dean's hand, the warmth of him. He can feel that he's close, his blood beating fast in his ears, the roll of his body turning juddery and uneven now as he

desperately tries to rock up faster and faster. His back arches, and he mouths into Dean's hand, *please, please, fuck, please,* and Dean's fingers tighten, and then Castiel's mouth is slack and open and wet against Dean's palm, unable to say anything. Dean's thumb drags over his cheek, and at last, the heat and need breaks inside Castiel. He smothers a choked noise against Dean's skin as he comes.

For a couple of seconds, Dean keeps slowly jacking Castiel's cock, his hand loose, while Castiel turns boneless and slumps back into the mud. He can feel that he has a smear of mud along the underside of his jaw where Dean has been cradling his face, dirt on his lower lip and up the line of his nose, but he doesn't care. Dean takes his other hand away from Castiel's to let him breathe, and then Dean wipes his hand on the leg of his combat pants while Castiel gets his clothing back into order.

With light discipline so absolute and the storm still crashing overhead, it is hard to see him, but Castiel hears the rustle of Dean's clothing as he zips up his pants and adjusts his jacket, hears the creak of his boots as he moves away to retrieve his helmet where he tossed it aside, and Castiel feels Dean pulling away.

Castiel frowns. It's unusual for Dean to be the one who is immediately concerned with returning to the status quo. Castiel reaches out for him, fists a hand into the sleeve of his jacket, and holds him still.

Dean stops.

Castiel whispers, “Everything alright?”

There is a pause, unreadable in the dark. “Yeah. Fine.”

Castiel gently tugs at him, silent, until Dean comes back, one knee

between Castiel's thighs. They misjudge the distance in the dark, and bump noses first, then foreheads, and then Castiel brings his hand up to cup Dean's jaw, and he kisses him.

The kiss is lazy and without any real urgency, but Castiel drinks it in – the warmth of Dean's mouth and the slow drag of his lips, the way their noses get in the way when they're too close together, the way Dean settles one hand on Castiel's chest and one hand to curl around the back of his neck. Something soft and aching swells inside Castiel's chest, filling him up to the point he feels he could burst.

Castiel pulls back just far enough to breathe, and all at once he wishes that there was light enough to see Dean by, and is also grateful for the dark so that Dean can't see his expression – because Castiel doesn't know what he looks like, but he can tell that the way he feels must be written all over his face. Dean's skin is damp with the rain and the mud, his hair flattened to his skull, and Castiel can feel dirt under his fingertips when he skims his thumb over the side of Dean's nose, over the crest of his cheekbone.

Dean tilts his head slightly to turn and kiss the heel of Castiel's hand, and Castiel's stomach does something he always thought was an exaggeration made up by Judy Garland. He flushes hot, and he rolls his eyes. “I'm too old for this,” he mutters.

“Yeah,” Dean agrees, his voice a dead-pan whisper, slightly muffled by Castiel's hand. “It must be really tough for you.”

Castiel huffs a small laugh in the back of his throat. “It is.” He leans forwards to press his mouth to Dean's temple and keeps his voice low. “I think the army will let me get to Berlin before they sell me for glue, at least.”

Dean glides a hand up from Castiel's waist over stomach and chest. “I

don't know. You seem pretty decrepit already."

"Shut the fuck up."

"I hear twenty-eight is the new fifty. Have you written a will?"

Castiel pushes at Dean, making him rock back onto his heels, but then Dean crawls inelegantly across to settle beside Castiel. He pulls one knee up in front of him, the other leg sprawled lazily out, slouching back against Castiel's side. Without speaking, Castiel shifts to make room for him.

He digs in his pocket for a flashlight by which to see his watch, casting the glow under his combat jacket where the light won't spill out to be detected by enemy, and he counts that he and Dean have another fifty minutes until Harvelle comes back from sentry. He palms off his helmet, setting it in his lap, and he tilts his head against Dean's shoulder. The top of his hair is sweaty, prickly in disarray, but Dean doesn't seem to mind. He slips an arm around Castiel's shoulders.

Castiel's boots sink gradually into the mud. He closes his eyes and he listens to the rain.

8th November, 1944

As near as Castiel can tell, the entirety of the 29th Infantry is straining at the start-line. The whole division is on reserve, moved up from the disgusting harbour areas outside Eygelshoven to a position beyond the German border, and now they stretch between in Baesweiler and Oidtweiler in the thousands, training hard and eyeing the horizon for the enemy as they wait. The brass are keeping quiet about what is due to happen next, but Castiel knows that they are aiming for an eventual capture of Jülich, the other side of the Roer river, and in the mean-

time they run endless aggressive patrols and prisoners snatches, darting into Kraut territory and out again.

Today, Baker Company patrols through the late afternoon, the sky turned grey and soupy with lightly misting rain. Underfoot the earth is turned to sludge, Castiel's boots slipping through the mud so regularly that he only half-pays attention to his surroundings, for fear of falling down in front of his men. He keeps an eye on where he is walking, and he holds his rifle loosely in his shoulder, tracking the barrel across the fields either side of them.

Their position here is within a mile of occupied enemy territory, and so they have to be careful. There have been rumours spreading from 1st Battalion that a company CO in the 115th took a round between the eyes on a patrol out from the harbour area. Castiel rubs distractedly at his forehead as he thinks about it, and he adjusts the chinstrap of his helmet.

Up ahead, Trenton, as point-man, lifts a flat palm to call for a halt, and Castiel drops instantly to one knee in the mud.

Trenton's hand moves in a series of gestures that Castiel can't see from this distance, but Lieutenant Shurley goes jogging up to the front, and Castiel watches them carefully and waits either to be called up or for the patrol to move on. As he waits, he digs in his webbing for his binoculars and squints out in the direction of Trenton's worried gesticulating.

There – two-hundred yards. The dull glint of metal along the ground. Could be fallen equipment, could be a mine. Could be an entrenched enemy position. Camouflaged trenches and subterranean pillboxes have been catching Allied soldiers out all over this area. Castiel gets up and heads over, keeping low just in case.

Trenton looks up as Castiel approaches. “Sir,” he says. “We've got a visual on something that might be enemy – say, two-hundred, two-fifty yards, quarter-left of--”

That confirms it: they're looking at the same thing. “Seen,” Castiel says. He kneels beside Trenton. “Any movement detected?”

“Nothing so far, sir.” Trenton tips his head over to one side. “It might be nothing, but--”

“No, you did well to spot it. It may well be nothing, but it may also be enemy, so – you did well.” Castiel exhales slowly, eyes narrowed, assessing. “Shurley, take first squad flanking right upon my orders towards that tree-line to draw fire – move in alternating bounds, and be careful.”

Shurley nods. “Yes, sir.”

“Have your second squad prepared to give covering fire upon contact, and I'll have four-platoon zeroed on your visual ready to fire, with three-platoon ready to clear. Any questions?”

“No, sir.”

Castiel slaps a grateful hand to Trenton's shoulder as he gets up, and he moves back towards the other platoon-leaders.

They run the action fast and organised, with Sergeant Harvelle, Lance Corporal Doe, and Privates Sorenson and Westall jogging out into the unevenly tilled lines of sugar beets as Castiel hunkers down beside one of the 60mm mortars, waiting for Shurley's first squad to make

contact.

When it happens, it's unspectacular. The enemy position reveals itself by squeezing off a few shots that are largely inaccurate; two-platoon opens fire on them; Castiel yells *now* and mortars slam down hard, kicking up mud and leaves sky-high, and he sends three-platoon forwards to clear it. They move easily to capture the solitary entrenched position, and take one prisoner with a gut wound that Dean binds up with tape and sulfa powder. The only real issue is when they retrieve the prisoner, and a position further north towards Bettendorf must have at last caught wind of their movements because there is a burst of machine-gun fire that takes out Westall's left shoulder.

“Fuck,” Westall bawls as Ted du Mort hauls him up and away out of the firefight. “They fucking got me – can you believe they fucking got me?”

They make a speedy retreat back to the reserve line, where a scout scar is waiting with two field surgeons that Dean greets by name and with a smile, as well as a translator to take the prisoner of their hands. All in all, it's not too bad a result for a day's patrol; it definitely could have gone a lot worse. Castiel still has to write up the action report, the POW capture notice, the notes on the casualty to consolidate with the medics; he still has to take supply details from First Sergeant Masters on ammunition and equipment.

He sets himself down to work, and as he crawls slowly through his piles of paperwork, he glances up from time to time and notes that the men, at least, seem satisfied.

They sprawl in shell scrapings and sit at the mouth of each other's foxholes, legs dangling down, to eat cold rations and argue. Lowell and Milligan are deep in a debate of the flaws and merits of *Hungry Hill*, while Concino and a number of replacements from four-platoon share a bar of D-rations around and discuss in fairly graphic terms

what they would do on an evening with Joan Crawford. Lieutenant Virgil is lecturing one of the replacements in his platoon on the age-old adage of *it's a sight, not a handle*, and some six yards away or so, Dean is recounting some story to half of one-platoon that has them all in stitches.

Cigarette smouldering half-forgotten in the corner of his mouth, Castiel sits for a moment on the edge of his foxhole, and he watches. He studies the wide, sweeping arcs of Dean's hands as he gestures in earnest; he studies the curve of his smile, the melodramatic ways he scrunches up his nose and brow as he impersonates various characters. He watches the way he rocks back on his heels as he starts to laugh halfway through the story, the way he lifts his elbows defensively as Harvelle lunges across to hit him, and he just goes on laughing.

Castiel takes his cigarette from his lips, exhales thin blue smoke.

It's good to see Dean light-hearted. That's not to say that Dean is ever terribly serious, but recently Dean has been taking combat losses to heart, and so there have been times when Castiel has got the distinct feeling that Dean is only going through the motions. This time is different; this is real.

“Apparently Roosevelt is getting re-elected for sure,” Private Tran announces distractedly, from where he leans back against the base of a tree just over from Castiel, a crumpled copy of *29 Let's Go* in his hands.

Hanscum lifts his head. “For real? Let me see.” He stretches out a hand across the foxhole, but Tran jerks away out of reach.

“Hey, spread out! Wait your turn.”

“Gosh, Kevin, it's Roosevelt, not Marlene Dietrich. I just wanna see the--”

“Wait your goddamn turn!”

Miller fishes some rations out of the back of his webbing, and as he digs about in his pocket for a can opener, he turns his head to Turner beside him and starts up conversationally, “You know, I heard Frank Harmon saying if we get over the Rhine quick, it'll be one easy push from there to Berlin, and we could have this whole thing wrapped up by Christmas.”

Turner raises his eyebrows. “You really think so?” he says, as he disassembles his rifle, his motions swift and practiced to the extent that he almost looks bored.

Miller shrugs loosely. “Sure – I don't see why not.”

“They won't let us go home, though,” Private Sorenson says, disconsolate. “They'll pack us off to Japan or somewhere, and it'll just keep going and going.”

Miller gives him a withering look. “You're a real buzz-kill, you know that?”

Castiel puts his cigarette back in his mouth, returning his attention to his maps, only half-listening.

“But I figure that if we kick the shit outta the Krauts, then Japan must realise we mean serious business,” Harvelle butts in from the other foxhole. “Right? I mean, who's gonna wanna keep going up against us

if we've kicked the shit out of the guys controlling half of Europe?"

"I'd sure want to turn around and go home, I know that. Do the Japanese not get homesick?"

"Beats me." Harvelle makes a grand show of his shrug. "I don't give much of a shit how the Japanese feel – Krauts, either. All I care is that someday soon I get to get out of this stinkin' fucking mudhole and back to my bar."

From two foxholes over, their attention being drawn to this new conversation, Sorento laughs, and the tone of it is slightly sharp. "I swear to God, Joe, everyone else here talks about their girl, their babies, and you're over here crying over your goddamn bar."

"It's my family's bar, okay. If I don't get back there soon, it might get taken from us, and I can't – I gotta get it back."

"Yeah, we're not get back and find you fucking the shelves or nothing, either--"

"Shut your fucking trap, Sorento," Harvelle snaps, with a threatening gesture as though he's seconds from launching himself across the foxhole at him.

Mercifully, Ash interrupts at that point, and he says with a dreamy sigh, "Me, I'm gonna get straight to Evelyn and put as many babies in her as there's room for, and I'm not gonna get out of bed for three fucking weeks."

"Sounds good to me!" Zeddmore exclaims.

At the edge of the group, Tran decides he is at last done with his copy of *29 Let's Go,* and benevolently tosses it over to Hanscum, who gives him a condescending, “Thank you,” in return.

“I'm gonna take the world's longest bath, that's for sure,” Bradbury says. “I'm gonna clean behind my ears and everything.”

Hanscum snickers. “Just like your mom used to tell you to.”

“I should've listened.”

“I'm excited to take a fucking shit without you dicks interrupting,” Zeddmore announces, scowling.

Ash chuckles, and Dean starts up solemnly, “Ed, I don't think you'd be able to take a shit without us serenading you. I don't think--”

“You know, I'm pretty sure I'd manage just fine.”

Hanscum sits back against the wall of the foxhole, stretching languidly as he yawns. “What about you, doc?” he says, and he bumps Dean's knee with his foot. “You gonna take a bath? You gonna find yourself some special girl?”

Castiel's hands become still on his maps. He carefully does not look over, but he stops rustling his papers so that he can hear, and in his peripheral vision, he sees Dean give a shrug.

“Look at him, playing all coy,” Zeddmore exclaims, and he points a finger into Dean's face. “Look! This fucker's got a girl back home for sure.”

“Who could say no to that face?” Harvelle says drily.

“You gotta have some plans, man. Nobody has no plans.”

“Uh,” Dean says eventually. “I dunno.” He has something in his hands that he turns slowly over and over and over, as though deep in thought, but Castiel knows that tic. He's stalling. “I guess I'm – well. I'm gonna go back to Lawrence, obviously. Check up on Sammy, make sure he's treating Jessica right. Move back into my old house, pick up where I left off at the garage, probably.”

Hanscum hums. “Sounds nice.”

Dean makes a low, non-committal noise, close enough to an agreement that he is not questioned on it, but to Castiel, Dean's careful avoidance of making any real response catches his attention like a floodlight.

As though oblivious, Castiel returns his attention to his maps, and the conversation moves on. Castiel turns his head to watch two replacements on his far side start up bickering on whether or not broads back home would be more into seasoned veterans than they were into pre-war soldiers, and he pretends that he is listening, and he pretends not to notice when Dean glances his way.

“Lieutenant Novak?”

Castiel jerks backwards, startled. Then he sees that at the edge of his men, one of the runners for battalion staff is standing with his hands twisted nervously against the outside seam of his combat pants. Castiel lowers his map and stands up. “What is it?”

“Briefing at battalion CP sixteen-hundred-hours,” the runner says.

Castiel shakes his sleeve back from his wrist to check his watch. Fifteen-hundred-thirty-six. “Copy that,” he says. “Thank you.” He folds up his maps, snapping the creases sharply outwards to get them neat, and he tucks them back into his map case before he stands up. As the battalion runner heads away through the rain and the trees, Castiel turns to his men. “Lieutenant Virgil?” he calls.

Lance Corporal Miller lifts his head. “Just went up that way, sir. Taking a piss, I think.”

Castiel hums, considering this. He checks his watch again. “When did he leave?”

“Only a minute ago.”

“Lieutenant Hester, then – he's IC in my absence,” Castiel says, and he heads up towards three-platoon to find Hester and tell him as much. Once he's passed on to his command, he goes back the way he came, towards battalion, and makes his way towards briefing.

He arrives a few minutes early; Naomi, Cain, and Gabriel are already lined up and waiting, but they are still waiting on the others. Castiel falls into line beside Gabriel, who glances over with a tired half-smile.

At exactly sixteen-hundred-hours, they begin. Major Campbell directs their attention to an enormous, creased map spread out across two rickety tables.

“Sometime soon, the U.S Ninth Air Force will be hitting these towns here – Eschweiler, Langerwehe, Gey, all these points here. That bombardement will open Operation Queen,” Campbell starts, his eyes moving over them each in turn. “The 29th, 30th, and 2nd Armoured are tasked with cracking open the front line, pushing through German territory fast to reach the Rhine river ASAP.” Campbell indicates on the map, his finger sweeping north-east. “That's just under thirty-five miles. If everything goes according to plan, Gerhardt thinks we might be able to make it within two weeks of the offensive opening. Then we'll be flanking left to drive up through the Rhine Valley to meet the British and Canadians up by Jülich, pocketing some hundred thousand Krauts on the river's west bank.” Campbell waves a hand in the air. “It's a way in the future now, and it's ambitious, but it's feasible.”

Castiel leans forwards to study the map, his eyes tracing the roads and contours, the straight railroad up through Setterich, with Siersdorf, Bettendorf, and Steerich peppered about further east.

Campbell looks around at them all. “There's no clear date or time for the move yet, but when word comes in, I'll send a runner, and we'll need to maintain constant vigilance until that time,” he says. “They've got to know something's up, even if they don't know what yet, so we need to be prepared – ready to move out at a moment's notice, and still ready to defend. Now, from what I understand, the 2nd Battalion will be on reserve at first, but we still need to be ready in case something goes sideways with the 115th, and we'll be moving out with them as soon as we get the order, regardless of whether we push up with them or stay rear of the line. On the day we send out the order, you'll need to set up coloured panels in front of your current positions to avoid friendly fire, before the Liberators go out with napalm.”

Castiel looks up at Campbell. He barely restrains himself from passing an incredulous glance in Gabriel's direction – the idea that he will need to put out a fucking sign to keep their own bombers from

dropping incendiary bombs on their head does not exactly inspire him with confidence.

At the far end of the map table, Naomi clears his throat. “Sir, when will we know when we're due to move?”

“I'm told we'll get at least six hours' notice.”

Castiel's eyebrows lift. Beside him, Gabriel says, “Six hours?”

“We're waiting on the weather, boys. We need clear skies to get our bombers in – that could be tomorrow, that could be in March. We're all waiting on word.”

Castiel says nothing, but his gaze flicks sideways to catch Gabriel's eye. The last time they had to wait on an Air Force bombardment, they came staggering onto Omaha Beach to find the sky not spotted with B-24s, but empty, and the German pillboxes still standing. Now, they are once again holding out for the Air Force to clear a path for them – or, alternatively, to set them all on fire.

“Are there any further questions?” Campbell asks, casting his gaze over each of them in turn.

No, sir, comes back as a chorus. Castiel stands up straight, chin lifted high, and he steels himself to go back into combat.

November 14th, 1944

Baker Company wait, and they wait, and they wait. Six hours' notice means that everything is as cut down as it can be without jeopardising harbour area functionality, ready to move out immediately. Their instructions are to be ready, but appear normal. They continue running patrols – albeit shorter, more tentative patrols, one platoon at a time – and so currently four-platoon is off in the direction of Oidtweiler, scouting out the terrain.

Castiel runs through the plan over and over in his head. If they get the call they'll need to pack up everything and move – taking down bivouacs and shelter-halves, removing comms-cord, filling in latrines, destroying CPs, verify weapons status, sweeping the perimeter to check that they're not leaving any equipment or intelligence behind, linking up with Able and Charlie on either side, setting out coloured panels, mobilising. He runs over who will do what, and that everyone already understands their various roles for the moment the order comes, and he tries not to feel as though he is vibrating out of his skin. Six hours' notice.

Some days are better than others, in that the weather is definitively terrible, rain slashing down hard through the trees, and battalion staff can pass on orders that companies are safe to engage in patrols and their usual field drills – no threat of the 29th suddenly needing to move in its entirety.

Some days, however, like today, are less clear. The sky overhead is grey with cloud, sunlight dappled where it occasionally breaks through, and there is no telling whether it will brighten up or thicken. On these days, all there is to do is keep busy and wait. The men are climbing the walls, figuratively speaking, and Castiel has a hangnail he can't stop picking at.

He sits on the edge of his foxhole, looking out at the front-line. This close to the enemy, the entire battalion is insisting on light discipline and noise discipline – what Hanscum has affectionately dubbed *fun discipline* – and so Baker is largely quiet. There is murmuring somewhere to the left of Castiel, an inelegant snort of laughter, and the sound of someone working a can opener through their rations. He

worries his hangnail between his teeth and tongue.

It's been like this for five days.

Castiel hauls himself to his feet, unable to stand it, and he heads off down the line to check sentry points. By his watch, four-platoon are due back in the next hour, which means that for a while at least there will be something to do, while they hand over. He shakes his sleeve back down over his watch, and as he walks, he resists the urge to check it again.

Most of the men barely stir as he passes, bored out their minds and forced into near-silence. To say that morale is low when they're like this is an understatement. They had a brief reprieve when they were informed that Supreme Commander Eisenhower himself was coming to visit the 29th, if made bizarre by the unexpected memo that the entire division were expected not to simply shout their usual, *twenty-nine let's go!* but rather to give Ike a rousing serenade of The Beer Barrel Polka. Castiel isn't much one for singing; apparently, neither are the rest of the 116th, as the tuneless cacophony that met the Supreme Commander had swiftly proved.

Ike was nice, according to the handful of men he'd spoken to in person, but a couple of friendly words from a man so high up the command chain that most of Baker didn't even feel like they could look him in the eye hasn't done much in the long run against the reality of day after day in vigilant silence at the bottom of water-logged foxholes. Too much time to think.

Dean has his work cut out for him, from blisters to splinters to cramps and twisted ankles – and one careless replacement from three-platoon who gave himself the M1 thumb during inspections – as well as generally checking on morale. Castiel sees him moving from foxhole to foxhole, smile wide and sunny as though to counter the dreary skies, telling the same five jokes and somehow getting a laugh every time. Castiel doesn't know that he can keep it up in these conditions,

as the men sink lower and lower into the mud.

November 17h, 1944

“Lieutenant Novak!”

Castiel's head snaps up as one of the Battalion runners comes sprinting across the muddy field, paper clutched tightly in one hand. It's a little after oh-one-hundred, and he was just taking apart his M1 for cleaning, but he lowers his cleaning rag now. “What is it?”

“Orders, sir – we're moving today,” the runner says breathlessly as he comes to skidding stop in front of Castiel, and he thrusts the paper at him.

Castiel takes the sheet from his hand and unfolds it. *116 2B TO MOVE 1200 FOR SETTERICH. DOMINATE HIGH GROUND AND ENVELOPE FOR 115TH TO CLEAR.*

“Twelve-hundred-hours,” he reads, and he lifts his eyes to look at the runner, sure that there must have been some error in communication. “We're attacking in full daylight?”

“That's correct, lieutenant.”

Castiel stares at him. “It's flat terrain. They'll be able to see us for miles.”

The runner shrugs. “From what I understand, sir, it's one quick bound

– seven hundred yards or so. Quick and easy. They won't even know what hit 'em."

Castiel doesn't answer, but he stares back at the runner, and he thinks, *that isn't how it fucking works.* He swallows down his uncertainty, and he gives a curt nod. "All other orders are the same?"

"Yes, sir."

"Alright. What intelligence do we have?" Castiel asks, already pulling out his map.

"Only what we have marked on the maps already."

Castiel's eyes snap up over the edge of his map to look at him. "There's no new intelligence?"

"The battalion is being transferred into the custody of the 115th of this assault, so there hasn't been a lot of time to scout out the ground and the defences," the runner explains.

Castiel nods, slowly. Just over ten hours to prepare for an assault in broad daylight with minimal intelligence.

"Thank you." Castiel folds the note in half and stuffs it into his jacket. He quickly sets about putting his rifle back together, piece by piece, and runs through peremptorily swift functions check before he gets up and heads back into the middle of Baker at a jog. "Platoon-leaders on me," he calls as he reaches the centre of the harbour area. "Platoon-leaders, now!"

The offensive technically began yesterday, but not for Baker – the 116th were left behind as the rest of the division struck out north for Siersdorf and Steerich. However, as far as Castiel can tell, this scheme backfired fairly quickly, as they had neglected to account for a small town, Setterich, providing near perfect enfilade on their assault from the left flank, and decimating much of the attack before it even got started. It's no surprise to Castiel that there's been a tactical about-turn now, nor is it a surprise that his men are getting sent in to mop up the mess.

He moves into the centre of the harbour area, drops to a knee, and waits as his platoon-leaders and First Sergeant come jogging up to join him. He barely gives them time to settle and get their notebooks out before he starts. “We're moving out for Setterich at twelve-hundred-hours,” he says. “I want us packed up and ready to move by eleven.”

Hester balks. “Moving out – what, into the offensive?”

Castiel bites back to urge for sarcasm. *No, Hester, on vacation.* He breathes through his teeth. “That's correct.”

Hester's frown is mirrored on Virgil's face now. Tentatively, he says, “In broad daylight?”

Fuck. Castiel doesn't have fucking time for this. “Is that a problem?”

Virgil's eyebrows lift, incredulous. “Well.... it's just that they're gonna be able to see us coming, is all, sir.”

“We'll be fine, Virgil.” Castiel pulls his map case out of his combat jacket and unfolds his maps on Setterich. He opts to ignore the

unhappy look that Hester and Virgil, and instead he begins to recount the orders as battalion explained them to him some days ago, and then to instruct them on the plan for Baker's movements.

Baker have two more hours of sleep as Castiel and the other officers prepare, and then at oh-three-hundred, Baker is thrust into organised chaos. They move through their drills just as they have planned and prepared and gone over in the days leading up to this moment, men run back and forth with bandoliers of ammunition, with entrenching tools, with messages from company to company to platoon to battalion.

Gabriel comes by briefly with spare mortar shells - “I remember you saying you were short,” he says, by way of explanation, as he drops off a loaded musette bag and a sheet of paper explaining exactly what ordnance it contains and in what quantities – and Castiel is so grateful for a moment he forgets how to speak and can only reach out a hand to Gabriel's shoulder.

Eleven-hundred-sixteen. Baker are ready and waiting, weapons loaded, camouflage cream applied, stripped out of what little cold weather gear they might have so that they don't overheat in exertion. They lie prone in all-round defence, their fingers jittery with impatience on their rifles. Castiel crouches in the centre, and he watches the minute hand of his watch crawl by.

Twelve-hundred hours. For a moment that seems to stretch into days, the earth and sky are quiet as Baker Company move out across the sugar-beet fields.

They only have to make it seven hundred yards across open flat ground before there is cover amongst the buildings of Setterich – five football fields away. They could run that, easy. Castiel can't quite convince himself, and then gunfire goes up, and Sorenson and Metcalfe are scattered into heavy collapse. They hit the dirt like their strings are cut, and the cry goes up to take *take cover, take cover* – but

there is no cover. Men throw themselves flat on their bellies in the mud, squirming through cold water and thrashing beet leaves. From the rear, Castiel frantically maps their progress, radio in hand.

“Baker-four-one, come in, this is the six,” he calls in. “Get smoke on those trenches, left two-hundred, right-stick. Range four-hundred – how do you copy? Over.”

“Baker-six, this is four-one – roger that. Over and out.”

They move up, bound by bound, across the water-logged fields, ducking low from the spray of machine-gun fire that tears up the earth on all sides. Castiel stays towards the rear, calling out orders down his radio mouthpiece as anxiety ratchets tighter in his chest with every step his men take towards Setterich. It's only seven hundred yards, he tells himself, over and over. They've pushed further than that on patrols – but this isn't a patrol, and the enemy position is firing upon the advancing line of the 2nd Battalion with devastating precision.

It takes out Private Somner's legs, cuts out Kesler's gut in one dark burst, snaps back Lance Corporal Stepp's head so hard that Castiel thinks it must have snapped his spine. In the far distance, there is the narrow-winged shape of a B-24 banking right, and then the horizon is lit up wit an eye-searing wall of flame, first white, then cooling to red and churning smoke. Castiel flinches at the sight of it, and then the roar of the explosion hits him a split-second later. Up ahead, Private Trenton takes two bullets to the shoulder, and he is flung back into the mud.

The rapid shift from Setterich not being seen as a target to being their immediate destination means that they don't have a lot of intelligence, but their objective is to dominate the high ground around the city in near-total envelopment. However, as Baker have made their way across the fields from Baesweiler and as they now come now towards the vast trench system surrounding the town, Castiel is increasingly feeling the pressure build.

Crouched with one knee in the mud, he flips hurriedly through his maps, tracking the contour lines. “Dominate the high ground,” he mutters to himself, with no more than a cursory glance at the landscape around them – at the flat expanse of field, allowing for near-perfect visibility over miles and miles, all the way to the river. Panic tightens within his chest. Fuck. Fuck. “Dominate the – Christ, there is no fucking high ground.”

At his side, Concino fidgets with the radio and says, “What are your orders, sir?”

Castiel swears under his breath. His objective is non-existent. He weighs up the options – defy orders by assigning his company a more concrete, feasible objective; continue towards the so-called high ground and potentially have his company decimated. He taps his fingertips agitatedly against the map edges.

“Sir?” Concino prompts.

He lifts his head and looks up at Concino, but he stares straight through as his brain spins, tracking the potential outcomes and consequences of a dozen different options. He makes the decision; he disobeys.

“Four-platoon, cease-fire and hold for coordinates, all rifle platoons forwards on the trenches – leave the pillboxes, we'll take those later. Alternating bounds, one- and two- taking the eastern side of the sector, three- moving on the trenches past the barn,” Castiel says, making executive decisions as his eyes move fast over the points marked on his map. “Current position is RVP-two, and our new objective is to clear as far as Josefstraße and then hold.”

Concino nods furiously and starts relaying down the radio.

They push and they push until at last they break on the trenches – hurling grenades, letting loose bursts of aggressive machine-gun fire as far as they have enfilade to cut down German soldiers scrambling for cover – and they drop into ankle-deep mud, bayonets fixed.

“Move up, move up,” Castiel yells, as one-platoon clear left and two-platoon clear right, but there is only so much room for them to manoeuvre, and the zig-zag of the trenches means that they can't fire far before they come to a corner behind which the enemy can wait. “Grenadiers at the forefront – move!”

Platoon by platoon and squad by squad, they push forwards. They slip in the mud, and there is the dull thud starting up of mortars firing on their position, but they push forwards.

19th November, 1944

At dawn, they break at last on Setterich, spreading out like a blast-wave to seek out alleys and gardens, kicking in doors. Three-platoon spearheads the assault, rushing ahead to find a way in and clear through every house between here and the edge of their sector. Castiel follows, Concino on his tail with the radio.

To say that it's been a gruelling few days would be an understatement. They made very little progress from the trenches on the first day of assault, hemmed in on all sides by gunfire and shelling, mud soaking into their boots and their socks and their combats as the storm starts up again. Their assault has been as much defence as it has been anything else, all-out trench warfare, using grenades and bayonets over any actual firepower because there isn't room to fire without hitting their own men. They lost Hough and Rivett, and the non-fatal casualties are near countless, Dean and Fitzgerald and du Mort

running themselves ragged trying to disinfect injuries in spite of the mud and the blood and the grime. Some of the men are starting to show signs of trench-foot, and there are more still whose hands are shaking on their rifles, younger draftees like Tran and Rosen, whose eyes turn glassy every time a shell is launched screaming towards them.

They are out of grenades now, and last night a German bomber came screaming over and Castiel's heart clenched in his throat waiting for the blast to hit, but it swept further west. He had pressed himself back against the rain-slick wall of the trench and listened with his eyes closed as the bombs ignited the other side of Setterich, where the 115th are fighting, and he was remorseless when he thought, *thank God it wasn't us.*

They sprint up fast through the streets, moving squads into buildings with rifles pulled tight into their shoulders so that they wheel the corner fast, ready to fire. They take prisoners, hauling German soldiers up by the fronts of their combats to force them out into the road and back towards where Able Company's XO is collecting POWs and intelligence.

Castiel moves with three-platoon as they manoeuvre through to the next MSR, and as they run, his eyes track the space ahead of them – the narrowing street, the hollowed automobile blocking the alley to their left, the rubble making the difficult access of the three alleys leading off to the right, the abandoned ordnance at the end, past the automobile, that makes this the obvious route. Castiel stops dead.

“Three-platoon, halt – Hester, on me!” he yells, and he drops to a knee with a sweeping gesture of the hand to indicate for him to come over. As soon as Hester is within five feet, Castiel points back the way they came. “Drop back with your men to left flank around via the houses we've already cleared to push in from around the park. Clear of this stretch of road from there, and you can still maintain your objective--”

“What?” Hester frowns.

“It's probably mined,” Castiel says bluntly. “Now – you take them around by that ruined building past the monument, you bring them around fast, because they're in the sight-lines then of the position already scouted out by Able--”

“Do we have actual intelligence that this section of road is mined?” Hester interrupts.

Castiel has to restrain himself from saying something unprofessional, because fuck, he has minimal intelligence on this town anyway, and he doesn't fucking need it – it's obvious. He has no idea why Hester is wasting his time nitpicking anyway, when his platoon is exposed at one end. “No confirmed intelligence, but the set-up is textbook. We're being funnelled. You'll need to--”

“All I'm saying is that we have no reason to believe this flanking mission is any less dangerous – you said it yourself, it's in the church's sight-lines, which we haven't cleared yet for snipers--”

“There's plenty of effective cover--”

“--when there's clearly a position up ahead that we could clear now, before the enemy have a chance to reoccupy--”

“It feels too convenient, Hester, and we're being funnelled--”

“--and it's going to take a long time to get around, Novak – time we could be using to secure our objectives more efficiently if we just--”

“Hester,” Castiel snaps, cutting over him. “You'll be leading three-platoon on a flanking mission around the buildings we've already cleared – that's an order.”

Hester bristles. “All I'm saying is that I think we should--”

“You shouldn't be thinking anything, Second Lieutenant,” Castiel says sharply, and the instant the words leave his mouth, he sees Hester's eyebrows lift incredulously, and he knows he sounds like an asshole. He doesn't care. He doesn't have time for this. “You should be doing as you're fucking told.”

Hester flinches back, mouth falling slightly open, and Castiel doesn't know whether he's really that shocked or just trying to make Castiel seem worse than he is, but either way, Castiel doesn't give a shit.

He narrows his eyes. “Get moving.”

Castiel doesn't hang around any longer; he pushes himself up onto his feet and he takes off at a jog down the street in search of four-platoon. He tries to shake off Hester's doubts; he is certain of his own command. That is all that matters.

20th November, 1944

There is too much to be done; Castiel's head is reeling. They only received confirmation that Setterich was secure a little over an hour ago, and now there are prisoners to be processed, reports to be written, mine-sweeping teams to be assigned, bodies to evacuated, supplies and equipment and ammunition to distributed, since the battalion supply officers were finally, finally able to get through to

Setterich. The men of Baker and the other companies of the 116th are still clearing through every building to check for lingering German soldiers or for hidden intelligence on what they might be facing next.

Mail is coming up from the rear along with supplies, so it's a fight to keep the men focused, all Baker's officers and senior NCOs snapping their fingers and calling out, *read your mail later, we've gotta move these bandoliers first.* There are runners from each company jogging in every direction, papers clutched tightly in their hands, and Castiel, looking up from his new maps, has to step neatly out of the way before he is bowled over by one from Easy Company.

As he lifts his head, he catches sight of Gabriel, grim-faced on the front step of one of the crumbling buildings on the far side of the road, watching a scout car idle. Castiel approaches with the intention of asking him about the expected turnaround time on the next offensive through Siersdorf to Koslar, but he is distracted on the way across by the sight of the scout car's contents: the body of a young soldier, slack-jawed and pale. One side of his head is missing.

Things like this shouldn't faze Castiel anymore, but he stumbles on the edge of the sidewalk as he reaches the far side of the road, and he half-turns back to watch the scout car pull away. As it disappears, rattling and bouncing over the shell craters in the tarmac, Castiel twists to face Gabriel. “Is everything alright?” he asks.

“Yeah, fine,” Gabriel says, in a tone of voice that indicates exactly the opposite. “Just – fucking combat fatigue.”

Castiel blinks. “You--”

“No, one of my replacements.” Gabriel palms off his helmet, scratches agitatedly at the side of his head. “Jesus, I've gotta – I'll see you later. I have to deal with this.” Helmet clutched in two hands, Gabriel

climbs down the steps and strides off quickly down the road, and then he turns a corner into a narrow alley, and he is gone.

Castiel rubs a hand over the back of his neck. Even when they aren't in combat, they go on losing men. It's exhausting. He lets out his breath, and folds his maps away into his combat jacket. He can look at those later, when he has a free moment, but for now, he has more important things he needs to be doing.

He checks up on his platoon-leaders as they supervise Baker clearing the remainder of their sector, and reviews some of the intelligence that they've gathered so far, and he studies the details of his next orders detailing the move up through Schleiden and the Aachen-Cologne highway. He notes the locations of unexploded ordnance to send back to battalion with the request for a detonation team, and he establishes a temporary rota for some of his men to take over from Charlie Company on the easternmost sentry point.

However, as he moves from one sentry to the next, he catches sight of a number of one-platoon crowded tightly together, all talking over one another. Annoyance sparks within Castiel, because goddamnit, they all have jobs to be doing, they shouldn't have time to just laze about – but then he realises that they are all crowded around Dean. He has his head ducked into his chest, and a hand over his face, and there is Bradbury and Tran with a comforting touch to his shoulder and the low murmur of reassuring voices, and Castiel is unable to ignore the clench of worry in his gut.

He walks over. “What the hell is going on?” he calls over as he nears the group. “You have your orders, and they weren't to stand around with your hands in your pockets. Everybody, move.”

“Sorry, sir,” Bradbury says, as the crowd begins to slowly disperse, although they are all still talking in tones that now turn excited, and it is hard to hear what any one man is saying. “We were just--”

“--doc got a letter from home, is all,” Hanscum joins in. “I know we weren't supposed to open mail but he--”

“--news from his brother, sir, so we're--”

Castiel's frown deepens, and concern curls tighter in the pit of his stomach as he pushes his way through towards Dean. “What's wrong?”

“--only just found out – bear with him for a couple hours, 'cause he's gonna be no good to anyone--”

“Winchester,” Castiel says, his brain already working through a thousand worst case scenarios – Sam has been in an accident, Sam is sick, Sam got kicked out of school, they lost the house – and when he finds Dean, in the epicentre of the chaos, with the heel of one hand pressed to his eye, Castiel can't stop himself from reaching out for him. “Is Sam alright? He--”

“He's getting married,” Dean says, his voice thick.

Castiel stops short, taken completely by surprise, but not before his hand finds its way to Dean's shoulder. “He's--?” Then he says, “No,” as relief washes over him like a wave, and he can feel his face soften into something warm. “Really? He asked Jessica to--”

“He's getting fucking married,” Dean says. “He's – and she said yes, she--” His words trip over themselves and he doesn't get any coherent sentence out, but he lowers his hand from his face, and at last Castiel can see the grin so wide it looks as though it must hurt his face, the way his bottom lip pulls awkwardly to one side like he's holding something back, his eyes red at the corners and shining.

“Congratulations,” Castiel says, only half-aware of the smile lifting on his own mouth in echo of Dean's. His hand tightens instinctively on Dean's shoulder, and then the next thing he knows, Dean is yanking him in as though to hug him.

Castiel doesn't have time to do anything about it; one moment he is smiling up at Dean, relief sinking all through him, and then Dean has an arm around his shoulders and an arm around his waist, and he's pulling him in tight against him.

Instantly, Castiel tenses up – this is too much, this is too obvious – but then he realises that it is too late to stop this from happening, and it will only look more incriminating with some excessive reaction. He takes a deep breath where his mouth is forced against the fabric of Dean's combat jacket, breathing in the sweat and gunpowder smell of him, and, carefully not leaning too heavily into the touch, he pats his hands at the centre of Dean's back. Friendly, but not intimate.

“Well, will you look at that?” First Sergeant Masters calls out, and someone mentions something about hell freezing over, and then Dean lets Castiel go.

Castiel feels the loss of him almost immediately, his body craving the nearness and the warmth again by instinct, missing the solid comfort of him. His hand lingers for a moment on Dean's shoulder, and he holds him at arms' length. “It's great news, Winchester,” he says, low and warm, and he catches Dean's eyes with a small smile, trying to communicate silently that is happy for him from the depth of his being, but that they can't do this here. He squeezes Dean's shoulder. “Now get back to work.”

Dean's shoulder tilts away from Castiel's hand, and he takes a step back. “Thanks, sir,” he says, and then Lowell comes up behind him and slaps his ass.

“Look at you, all misty-eyed,” Bradbury teases.

Dean wipes roughly at his eyes, and then shoves at him. “Alright, fuck off, all of you,” he says, and he swats at Lowell as he walks away past, and Castiel watches them go back to their work, all still ribbing Dean as they go.

“Leave him alone,” Tran says. “I'm on your side, Dean--”

“*Thank* you.”

“Anyway, looks like you're gonna need a Plan B there, doc,” Zeddmore says airily.

Dean balks. “The hell do you mean?”

“You're gonna be all kinds of gooseberry when Sammy and Jessica are there making babies and cooking casseroles.” Zeddmore means it jokingly, Castiel presumes, but Dean hears it in much the same way that Castiel does, from where he is ten feet back and still inadvertently listening: *there's no room for you there.*

Castiel shouldn't still be listening. He certainly shouldn't be stood in the space they left behind, watching the way that Dean stops dead when he realises that his brother's happiness is pushing him out of his plans for the big 'after'.

Dean says, “I--” and gets no further – and then he looks back at Castiel. Whether intentional or not, he realises that he needs a new

plan for what he's going to do when this is all over, and he looks to Castiel, mouth open and wondering.

Castiel drops his gaze immediately, busying himself with a near frantic pretence at having not been eavesdropping. He fumbles with the zipper of his combat jacket to get at his map case, and unfolds his maps of the area surrounding Koslar, brow furrowed as though in deep, contemplative study. He doesn't look up at Dean; he doesn't watch him walk away. He just goes on staring straight through his map, understanding nothing of the roads and contours, and he tries so hard not to think about Dean in Kansas, the heat of the sun and the open skies and the freckles on his skin, that he can think of nothing else.

21st November, 1944

The next objective is Koslar, a small district just alongside the Roer – the last real position between the Allied Forces and Jülich, on the river's far bank. Most of the territory west of the the river in the U.S Ninth Army's sector has been cleared, and when Castiel gets his next orders, he can't help but sag at the shoulders. He is bodily exhausted.

It's a little after thirteen-hundred-thirty and already he has the capture and clearing of one German town under his belt. The 116th pushed through the MSR at Aldenhoven this morning, clearing a supply and cas-evac route, and according to Major Campbell, the 115th are pushing through Durboslar, while the 30th Infantry Division are taking the ground north of Eschweiler. After clearing Setterich, Baker barely had an hour for preparation and for catching up with the supply officer before they were on the move north-east again – God forbid they be allowed any time to rest. Castiel understands that the priority is creating a bridgehead at Jülich in order to continue into the Rhineland, but his men are struggling.

For now, they hunch their shoulders against the cold and the rain, and they dig into a temporary position. Their harbour area sits on the crest

of a small slope looking down towards Koslar, and Jülich just a mile or so past it, on the other side of the darkly twisting water. Castiel has passed on orders to dig in deep; words has come across from the 175th that the German Panzer Brigade has arrived, and that the Tigers are out in force. After Aachen, Castiel has seen enough of Tigers already for a lifetime, but if they're here, he wants to be sure that his men can withstand a shelling.

Castiel walks the length of the harbour area, alternating between reviewing on the progress of his men, checking and double-checking the intelligence he received from battalion only an hour ago, and squinting out towards Koslar. It doesn't look a terribly intimidating target, but it hasn't been quiet for a moment since they arrived, either rattling with distant machine-gun fire or smoking as an unseen Howitzer spits out shell after shell at the 3rd battalion position further east.

In one foxhole, Sorento and Doe are arguing in an undertone over who is hogging the entrenching tool; in another, Private Tran is desperately trying to scoop rainwater out with his bare hands, which seems futile given that there has been little reprieve from the rain in days.

It taps an irregular rhythm off the top of Castiel's helmet and seeps through his combat jacket until he feels the cold in his bones. He doesn't remember, at this point, how it feels to be completely dry – or warm, for that matter. He has so much mud caked onto his boots that he feels almost lopsided as he walks, more encrusted onto one foot than the other, but he has already given up trying to remedy that problem.

Castiel reaches the end of four-platoon, where a sentry-point is being set up underneath an already-drenched bivouac, and he is just turning around to patrol back the way he came when at that moment there is a loud, sharp crack.

Castiel is down on one knee in the dirt before he has even fully

acknowledged that someone is firing at them, and he tucks himself down behind a tree – and then there is silence. No-one yelling *contact front,* no *enemy seen*, no orders from any officers or NCOs.

His mind is racing, eyes tracking across what he can see of the harbour-area to evaluate at high-speed the potential weaknesses in their position – the westernmost sentry-point is closest to the enemy, but his men are spread the thinnest around the eastern sentry so it's not impossible that the enemy might have pulled a flanking manoeuvre; he can see smoke rising from a cluster of buildings down the hill a mile or so away, which could the result of firing mortars, although it was a single gunshot, not the kind of continuous firing of shells that would warrant that kind of smoke; those buildings could hold a sniper, though, especially the taller on the left of the MSR through Koslar, where part of the roof is caved in – but nothing is happening.

Castiel glances around, bewildered, and all around him are the scattered men of his company, some in their foxholes, some on their bellies in the dirt, some hidden behind cover like Castiel is. All of them, with their hands white-knuckle tight on their weapons, waiting wide-eyed to hear what is happening, where the attack is coming from. However, there is only the silence.

To say that it's unsettling is an understatement; Castiel feels cold dread creep through his blood.

Then: *medic!* It's First Sergeant Masters' voice, high-pitched and almost cracking. “Fuck – we need someone up here, now!”

Castiel straightens slightly and lowers his rifle. He twists at the waist to peer around the edge of the tree, but there is still no more gunfire. Only silence.

For a moment the fear is debilitating, fusing his feet to the cold mud, and then he swallows it down until that shaky panic feels a little more like curled fists, like irritation that once again nobody is doing their fucking jobs right. His heart is beating so fast that he feels he can barely breathe through it.

He is still assessing; he can't turn it off. The taller building on the left with the caved-in roof. Mortars on the roof-top until it's destroyed, sending a rifle platoon down to clear with suppressive fire from one of the other platoons, his final platoon in reserve. The taller building on the left, before someone else is shot. If everyone keeps in cover, then the majority of his men will be safe, with the exception of four-platoon, whose foxholes are shallower to account for visibility with their mortar stands. He forces himself to breathe.

Castiel realises that at some point, he has loaded his rifle, made ready, and he now has it pulled into his shoulder. He lowers his rifle, takes his finger off the trigger.

“What the fuck is happening out there?” he calls out. “Does anyone have a visual? Is it contact or not – we need some communication here!” Castiel unloads, and tucks the round already slotted into the chamber back into his clip, and then he turns back to catch Private Roush's eye. “Get me a radioman up here ASAP.”

Roush nods, opens his mouth to give some kind of affirmation, and then Masters' voice comes back from through the trees: “No contact, sir, it's just – fuck. Fuck, it's Rosen, sir.”

Masters' voice tails off at the end, and there are no more cries for a medic.

The quiet endures, a hundred men taking cover and waiting to hear whether they're in danger, and Castiel gets up onto his feet with the

thought that this is worse than being shot at. He thinks he knows, already.

Castiel turns his head to Roush. “Nix on the radioman. Hold position.” His voice is low, but he can hear the authority in his words. He hears it as though from someone else's mouth.

He stands and he walks for two-platoon.

There are heads craning up from foxholes as Castiel passes, bewildered expressions and fingers clutching tight at weapons. Towards the far end of two-platoon, there is less of that; men stare straight forwards, as though they don't care to know what has happened just past their arcs of fire.

Benji Rosen's foxhole is just past platoon CP. Castiel comes to stand at the edge of the foxhole mouth, and he exhales, slow and even.

They are crowded around him in the way they go to take care of all casualties. His head is tilted up against Private Turner's knees, First Sergeant Masters and Private Armstrong supporting his shoulders, Dean with a hand at his throat for a pulse, Private Bearcey with his fingers tangled through Rosen's – all this, as for a normal casualty, except for the blood pouring down from his nose and open mouth, the hole in the back of his skull.

“Sir, I don't know what happened,” Bearcey is saying, breathless and panicked. “He was fine one second, and then he just--”

Castiel breathes. He has his rifle in one hand, held loose by the sling, his other hand useless and empty at his side, and he is staring into Private Benjamin Rosen's vacant eyes like he's staring into the dark. He breathes, and he forces himself to treat this as any other combat

casualty. A direct hit from a shell, or a bullet through the heart, or an S-mine going off underfoot. He breathes.

"First Sergeant Masters, get among the men – don't let this spread," he says, voice turning hard to hide the hollow feeling underneath. "Turner, get Lieutenant Shurley, and then get me a radioman to call this into the S-1. Winchester, ready the body for when battalion staff get here. Armstrong and Bearcey, move foxholes for now. Take on some food, make some coffee. We have this under control." Castiel doesn't feel as though he has this under control. He feels as though he's stitching his men together with safety pins.

For once, Castiel doesn't get a chorus of *yes, sir* back at him. They just go, in silence, jogging away through the trees, dead leaves crunching underfoot. At the bottom of the foxhole, Dean pulls off a single dog-tag with blood-dark hands that Castiel can see shaking from five feet away. Castiel wants to call out to him, but the words stick in his throat.

"Lieutenant Novak?" Concino's voice comes up behind Castiel.

"Yes," Castiel says, turning. "Call into battalion HQ, please."

He tells Concino, and he sets his jaw against the sour, gut-wrenching feeling rises inside him when he has to describe the nature of Rosen's casualty, when Major Singer says, *so it spread to your company at last, then*. Singer says something about combat fatigue, something about how in some ways this is at least easier to manage than a Section 8, something about Castiel being prompt with the letter home – Castiel isn't entirely listening. He gets the information he needed: they'll send a scout car at seventeen-hundred-hours for the body.

Castiel is distantly aware of moving from man to man, giving orders to keep this under control, but if he were asked, he is not sure he could

tell anyone what he has been doing.

Something in his chest is pulled so tight that he thinks he must have some kind of stitch, but he doesn't think about it, and so it isn't happening. He doesn't think about it; it isn't happening. He can hear the news passing quietly from foxhole to foxhole – *did you hear? Suicide. No, suicide. Rosen. From two-platoon.* It drums in Castiel's head like the ticking of an old clock.

He moves to the rear of the line and back again, delivering information, contacting the S-1 and the S-4 and the aid station, while the platoon-leaders and the First Sergeant keep Baker under control, keep them working purposefully at their foxholes. Castiel is so concerned with keeping busy, not giving himself a moment to think, that it takes him almost a half hour to realise that he has not seen Dean since he left him with Rosen's body.

Rationally, Castiel knows this is not so unusual; it's perfectly feasible that he might have gone back to battalion with the scout car, or taken a ride to the aid station to help out the other medical staff. In his gut, however, he knows that is not the case. He sees Dean's shaking hands, over and over, in his head like a looping film-reel behind his eyes.

He radios the aid station first to see if Winchester is working there – negative. He goes then to one-platoon, ducking low under branches and stepping carefully over comms-cord until he finds the foxhole where Bradbury is breathlessly taking a break from digging his foxhole.

“Lance Corporal,” Castiel asks, and he drops into a crouch beside the foxhole so as not to loom.

“Hi, sir.” Bradbury sets down his entrenching tool heavily so that it sticks straight upright in the mud. “Everything alright?”

“Fine, thank you. Have you seen Winchester?”

Bradbury grimaces. “No, sir. I thought he got sent up to two-platoon to, um. Help out with – things,” he says delicately. “Sir.”

Damnit. Castiel lets out his breath between his teeth. “Alright, never mind. Thank you. As you were.” He stands up.

“Maybe try Harvelle, sir?” Bradbury suggests, retrieving his entrenching tool and beginning to dig again with aggressive fervour. “Joe might know.”

Castiel hums a distracted agreement, and heads off again through the platoon. "Thanks.”

He stands for a moment in the centre the harbour area, hands in the pockets of his combat pants and looking out at each platoon where they branch off from the CP, and then he heads out past one-platoon, in the direction of battalion.

No-one would question Dean taking the cas-evac route; it would just be assumed that he was going to the aid station. Of course, if he was to veer off left before he reached battalion CP, it would take him away through the trees to a position not quite on the front-line, not quite in reserve, and after twenty yards or so through the mud and the rain and the tangling undergrowth, there, at last, is Dean.

He sits at the mouth of an abandoned, half-dug foxhole that must have been part of an old German position. He's within shouting distance of Baker, Castiel notes, despite being out of sight, and something about that just makes this worse. That he wanted to escape and was still

unwilling to stray far enough that he wouldn't be able to hear if they needed him. His back is partially turned, so that Castiel cannot see his face, but he can see that his hands are loose, lifeless, in his lap. They are stained with blood and unmoving.

Castiel pauses, a couple of yards back from him, and he hovers for a moment, uncertain. Then he steels himself, and he walks slowly over. He clears his throat as he approaches, so that Dean knows someone is coming, and then he moves to sit beside Dean on the edge of the foxhole.

“You know, your CO would probably say that it's dangerous to be this far out from the harbour area on your own,” he says, feeling awkward, as he climbs down. His knees pop as he gets in, and the ground is cold and wet beneath his ass as he settles beside Dean. He doesn't look over at him straight away; he stares down into the foxhole. He goes on, more quietly, “But then, I'm not here as your CO right now.”

Dean doesn't answer. He doesn't move. In fact, he gives no indication that he even knows Castiel is there.

Castiel looks at him. Dean's eyes are red and glassy, staring as though oblivious into an unseen middle distance, but he is still breathing, and that isn't nothing. “Dean,” he says softly.

“Yeah.”

Dean's voice is low, emotionless. That he responds at all takes Castiel by surprise, and he is struck by the realisation that he has no idea what to say. He's bad at this, unpractised. His method of dealing with his problems is to pretend they aren't there until they go away; he gets the sense that Dean is of a similar mindset, and call him hypocritical, but Castiel sees now that it isn't helpful.

He struggles for words, for anything that isn't completely meaningless. He comes up empty.

Finally, Castiel reaches across and he takes Dean's hand, but before he can curl his fingers over Dean's knuckles, Dean pulls his hand away to pick distractedly at blood crusted onto his thumbnail. Castiel's hand hovers awkwardly in the space between them, and then slowly he retracts it into his own space.

“It's fine,” Dean says, before Castiel has even found the words to ask. He doesn't look at Castiel; he just goes on picking at his bloody hands. “I'm – yeah, it's fine.”

Castiel watches Dean's hands as he rubs at the blood that has seeped into his cuticles and stained. Castiel doesn't prompt him. He doesn't press. He just sits there quietly, with his hands in his lap, beside Dean, their shoulders grazing. The rain comes down around them, uneven as the wind picks up and drops again, shaking through the trees overhead. It turns the afternoon light pale grey and bleary.

Dean is silent for a long time, long enough that Castiel starts to think that maybe Dean privately wants him to fuck off, and that this is a wasted effort. Worried, he glances over, but as soon as he does, Dean turns his head away to face the other direction – but not fast enough for Castiel to escape seeing him cry, his face turned blotchy and pale, his mouth crumpled.

Castiel looks down at his own lap, and he pretends not to notice Dean's shaky intake of breath, or the way that he scrubs a hand roughly down over his face. He waits, and when Dean finally speaks, the first thing he says is, “I didn't know how bad it was.”

Still not looking at him, Dean stares down into the foxhole and takes one slow, shuddering breath after another. His hands are trembling.

“I knew he was – I just didn't – I--” Dean can't get the words out. “I figured he just – I mean. Everyone is having a hard time. Everyone is scared. I didn't think--” He presses the heel of his hand hard against his nose, and he swallows several times. “I guess I just – I didn't figure--” He cuts himself off. He exhales, slow and uneven. “Fuck.”

Castiel tilts across to press his arm against Dean's. He swallows, and says, “It's okay.”

Dean jerks away. “It isn't.”

“Yeah.” Castiel presses his lips together, and he takes a deep breath. “You're right, it isn't. But it isn't your fault, either.”

“I'm supposed to be looking after everyone,” Dean says, voice turning hard. “If I can't even do that--”

Something twists painfully within Castiel's chest, and all he can manage is, “Dean--”

Then Dean abruptly starts laughing. The sound of it is bitter and alien, raising goosebumps on the back of Castiel's arms. “Fuck, my dad was right. I'm not a soldier. I'm not a doctor. I'm not anything, I'm just – fucking--”

“Stop it,” Castiel says sharply. “Don't you dare.”

“I couldn't save Benji. Couldn't save Johnny, or Metcalfe, or Sorenson, or Aaron, or Renouf.” Dean starts ticking off his fingers, his mouth split into a wide, disorienting smile that sets off anxiety churning in Castiel's gut because it is so far from the Dean that he knows. “Baxter, Kowalewski, Richardson. Sergeant Brady. And Sergeant Campbell. I couldn't save Yen, or Morvey, or Alfie Wilson--”

“Shut the fuck up, Dean,” Castiel interrupts.

Dean turns and he looks at Castiel hard. “I let Lieutenant Wallace die.”

Castiel flinches.

He looks away, and he forces himself to breathe. It fucking hurts, he won't deny that all at once like a kick to the chest and like the earth has been pulled out from beneath his feet – but he knows now that Dean has played his trump card. He takes a deep breath, and then another, and he swallows down the hot flare of grief that curls his hands tight into fists.

Castiel doesn't know what to say, and so when he finally speaks, after a struggle, the first thing he says is, “You know, you can call him Inias. I know you know what his first name was.”

It's not the answer Dean seems to have been expecting, and so in that way, it works. He is caught off guard.

“Thought that undermined officer authority,” Dean says at last, a little sullenly, but he is deflating.

“It does. But.” Castiel can't bring himself to say, *that doesn't matter*

when he's dead. He is getting used to it now, but that doesn't mean the words are easy. “Look, we're at war. We were sent here to kill people, the same way they got sent here to kill us. We were always going to lose more than we save.” He turns partway to face Dean, tilting until their knees bump. He pushes back the rim of his helmet so that he can look Dean in the eye. “This was never going to be easy, and you've got the hardest job of all. And I'm not just saying that because I--”

Castiel cuts himself off just in time.

He swallows.

Buoying himself up with courage, Castiel tries again. “Dean, you lose more than you save. But we lose a lot fewer than we would if we didn't have you.” He reaches across for Dean, and takes his hand again, and this time, Dean lets him. Castiel curls his fingers through Dean's, palm-to-palm, and sweeps his thumb over the rain-damp back of Dean's hand in a steady, comforting rhythm. “You saved Gallagher,” he goes on. “And you didn't just stitch him up and keep him from bleeding out. You sat with him, afterwards, for hours, because he was scared. I couldn't have done that. Sometimes I still – when I think about Gallagher--” His throat closes off. He swallows, and starts again. “I couldn't have done that. You saved Sergeant Lafitte, too. And Sergeant Barnes.” Castiel hesitates. “You saved me.”

Dean looks at him. His eyes are red.

Castiel takes a deep breath, steadying. “I think,” he says, slowly, forcing himself to be honest even when everything in his chest pulls tight with fear at admitting too much, “if not for you, I would have put a rifle in my mouth long before Rosen did. And – I don't feel that way anymore.” He considers it. He still wakes up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night with Recouvrance an indistinct blur of terror and panic and hopelessness. He is still afraid, but he supposes perhaps he's getting used to it. “That's not entirely down to you, but I do believe it wouldn't have happened without you.”

Gently, Castiel squeezes his hand. Dean is still staring at him, his expression unfathomable. The line of his mouth is soft and sad, and Castiel can't look at him without a keen ache blooming beneath his ribs like a bruise.

“And I believe in my gut,” Castiel goes on, “that sometimes you are the only thing holding this company together. And truthfully, I don't know how you do it.” He can't hold Dean's eyes anymore; he looks down at their entwined hands, the dark red of Dean's fingers against Castiel's own hand, pale with cold. “How you can be so relentlessly optimistic. Selfless, and warm, and kind, and patient, and emotionally intelligent, and – funny, even.”

Dean lets out a tiny huff of air like he might be trying hard to force himself to laugh. “I'm hilarious,” he says, his voice small.

A smile lifts on Castiel's mouth. “See,” he says. “I don't know how you do it.”

“A lot of practice being a smart-ass, mostly.”

“I can believe that,” Castiel says, and he nudges Dean's shoulder gently with his own – and just slightly, so that were Castiel not paying attention he might not have noticed it, Dean leans into the touch. Castiel swallows. “Dean, you have an incredible heart,” he says softly. “And a staggering capacity to put others' needs before your own – but you can't save everyone. No matter how hard you try.”

Dean lets his breath out. Slowly, his grip tightens on Castiel's hand, and his thumb rubs a tentative line along the side of Castiel's index finger. At last, he says, “Hell of a speech, sir.”

Castiel cants his head over. “I was class valedictorian.”

Dean lifts his head to look at him. “You serious?”

“No."

Dean shakes his head.

"Inias was," Castiel says, as an afterthought, as though that justifies it. "I helped him practice, though, so.”

Dean's expression falters. “Cas, I--” He clears his throat. “I'm sorry I said--”

“It's fine,” Castiel says, avoiding Dean's eyes. He forces himself to shrug it off. “Just – I don't want to--”

“Yeah. We don't have to.”

They are quiet for a moment, sat side by side, and Castiel thinks that he needs to get back to the company, that he's been away too long at a time when his men may well be falling apart, but for now he ignores it. Baker can survive another five minutes without him.

Dean doesn't look at him, but he tilts his head over towards him, and he mumbles, “You got a smoke?”

Castiel lets go of Dean's hand. He digs into his combat jacket for his

cigarette tin, pushing past crumpled reports and half-eaten ration bars, and when he pulls it out, he opens it to find there is one only smoke left: the half-burnt stub he smoked in the LCVP down to Omaha. He looks at it, and he goes on looking at it, and then he holds the tin out to Dean.

Dean looks over. “What?” He glances down at the tin, and slowly, he realises. “No.”

“It's alright,” Castiel says. “It's just a cigarette.”

Dean stares at him, unmoving, and so Castiel takes matters into his own hands. He sets the half-cigarette – more than a little stale now, the paper damp and musty – between his lips, and fishes his lighter out of his jacket. It takes him four tries to get the cigarette to light, the rain and the wind conspiring against him even when he cups his hands around the lighter, but eventually it catches, and he inhales deeply until the tobacco burns hotly in his throat. He exhales pale smoke, and he holds the cigarette out to Dean.

For a long moment, Dean doesn't react, just looking at him, but then finally, he reaches across. Their fingertips graze as Dean takes it.

Dean takes a long drag, holding it in his lungs for what seems like forever, and when he exhales, he says around a mouthful of smoke, “This tastes like shit.”

Castiel half-smiles. “It's flavoured with the finest Omaha brine,” he corrects, and he takes it back from Dean's hand when Dean holds it out. “Have some respect. It's come a long way.”

He puts it to his lips and takes a drag, and he has to admit it doesn't taste great. By this point, it's probably gone mouldy. if he had waited

any longer and actually smoked it on the way home, it would probably be toxic; it's probably a good thing they're smoking it now.

He exhales slowly, and when he glances over at Dean through the twisting white smoke, he sees Dean looking at him with that unreadable expression again. It makes Castiel feel as though the ground beneath them is unevenly tilted, that he is moments from slipping off an edge he wouldn't know was there until he was already free-falling.

“What?” he says. He fans his hand in front of his face to clear the smoke, and he holds the cigarette out. “What is it?”

Dean doesn't take the cigarette straight away, and Castiel's hand hovers indecisively in the air between them.

“Nothing,” Dean finally says. He takes the smoke, but only holds between finger and thumb, and he looks at it. “I just – thanks.”

It isn't what Dean meant to say. Castiel knows him well enough by now to recognise that.

“Whatever you need,” Castiel says.

He watches Dean carefully, the anxious way his fingers jitter on the cigarette, the way he opens his mouth as though to speak and then abortively closes it again, the pull of muscles in his throat as he swallows. He is thoroughly filthy, mud even in his eyelashes and smeared across the hollow of his collarbone where his combat jacket doesn't quite cover him, and there is rain drumming faintly off the top of his helmet. The Red Cross sign on the front is peeling. For the first time since Castiel has known him, Dean looks impossibly afraid.

“I just,” he says at last, his voice quiet, and he clears his throat. He doesn't look at Castiel. “I guess I never thought we'd get far enough with this for me to give a shit about what happens to us.”

There is the edge. Castiel stares at Dean, his heart in his throat and everything in him aching, and he doesn't know what to say.

“Dean,” he manages, after a long moment, his voice strained.

He wants to say that he tried, he tried so fucking hard to stop, to push Dean away before this got out of hand. He wants to say that sometimes he would do anything to stop feeling like this. He wants to say that he fucking hates being queer and stuck on him and that he wishes they'd never met, and he wants to say that he wouldn't change this for anything. He wants to tell him he loves him.

He doesn't say anything.

Dean taps ash from the cigarette, now smouldering low between his knuckles, and he sets it to his lips, breathes in deep. They need to get back to Baker, ready to move on Koslar, but all that Castiel can think about is the future.

Chapter End Notes

Summary of final section, dated the 21st November: Baker Company are in foxholes waiting for the next move to attack Koslar, and while they are stood down, Benji Rosen shoots himself and is killed. Dean is the one who has to prepare the body for processing and is pretty shaken by it. Cas goes about his officer business to take care of the incident, and afterwards he

realises that Dean is nowhere to be seen. He seeks out Dean and finds him sitting out past the harbour area and trying not to cry. They talk about how Dean thinks he failed Rosen, and how he can't save anyone, and Castiel says that Dean is doing more than enough, that he can't save everyone but that he is doing an incredible job holding the company together. Castiel gives Dean his lucky half-cigarette from the D-Day LCVP and they smoke it together, and then Dean says that he never expected their relationship to get far enough for him care about what happens to them.

Chapter 16: Koslar

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the wait – and just a heads-up, there's some vaguely transphobic shit towards the end of the 28th November! Nothing really awful, though – just like... misgendering nonsense. And things.

21st November, 1944

Dear Sam,

I still can't believe it. I can't believe it. Tell me again what happened, tell me everything. Jesus, Sammy, I'm so fucking proud of you – hell, everybody is. All the guys got around when I found out and they were saying congratulations, saying you were a crazy lucky guy who didn't deserve a doll like that, but you deserve her. She sounds like she makes you real happy, and she sounds dynamite, so I'm real happy for you. When are you gonna do it, then? You spoken to her family about it? You better not marry that girl before I get back, I swear to God. I gotta be there to embarrass you and tell her all stories about that time you tried to get a whole teaspoon up your nose. I mean, if you're gonna have kids, she better know the kind of gene pool she's gonna be getting her kids into.

And get the fuck outta here with that bullshit apology – we're not fucking Little Women, okay, we don't have to get married in order. It's fine that you're out Stateside with your thumb up your ass on the make while I'm fighting for Uncle Sam. Slaving away in the mud and the rain, and you're eating apple pie and taking Jessica to the movies. I don't care. I'm fine here.

Well, good for Dad. At least he's safe. Anyway, don't you have a college on the other side of the goddamn country you need to worry about? Everything here is fine. Pushing on through Germany, not a lot to report. It's fine. I'll write again as soon as I can. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

22nd November, 1944

The first shell hits down towards three-platoon, kicking up a thick black pillar of mud and smoke. Castiel flinches down deeper into the trench as shrapnel and mud comes splintering his way, and then he steadies his helmet with one hand, and he heads off down the line.

“Take cover! Keep your heads down,” he shouts as he climbs over sprawled legs and men hunched together between the narrow walls, mud sucking at his boots with every step. “Stay down, stay in cover until the barrage stops!”

The rain comes slashing down hard, seemingly from all sides as the wind snaps over the flat terrain to burn Castiel's cheeks and make his eyes water. It's been like this for days now, crawling at agonising pace endlessly forwards towards Koslar, an objective that seems to Castiel as though it may as well be sand for all that he can reach it.

The next shell hits a couple feet in front of the trench, and Castiel sees Private Brocker – too close to the mouth of the trench, goddamnit, Castiel told him to take cover – get tossed back by it hard enough to hit the back wall before he slumps into the mud. The lines and angles of his body are all wrong, one arm broken at the very least, and Castiel is about to yell for a medic when he sees the slow ooze of blood from Brocker's open mouth.

Castiel swallows. He keeps going.

Screaming through the air, the shells seem to crash all around them, and there are bullets cracking over their heads, splintering equipment, snapping back Private Harman's head where he stands too high in the trench. Then, just at the edge of Castiel's sight-line, something lands five or six yards away to his left. His head snaps over to follow it, and he yells, “Take cover, take cover--” except when the grenade detonates, it's not to blow a hole in the cluster of men standing either side – it's to cough, splutter, and then release a thick plume of red smoke.

Castiel's stomach drops.

Up and down the line of the trench, he can see red smoke rising – one towards four-platoon, one down the far end of two-platoon – and beyond the German line, there is movement.

“Get those out of here,” Castiel yells. “Get clear of the smoke! Pull back to defensive positions – Concino!” He half-twists at the waist, frantically searching for his radioman. “Concino, where the fuck--Concino?”

“Sir--” Concino comes breathlessly scrambling up from down the line, radio mouthpiece in hand. Beyond him, smoke is filling the trench, hot and choking. Castiel snatches the mouthpiece from his shaking hand.

“Baker four-one, this is the six – come in, Baker-four-one,” he says, speaking so fast that his words are almost tripping over each other.

There is a moment of silence that seems to last and last. Then: “Baker-six, this is Baker-four--”

“Defensive positions now – mortars effectively immediately on

established points of fire," Castiel shouts down the line, ducking down low as gunfire rattles all around – and someone is screaming, there are cries for a medic, and someone says a loud *oh, shit*, as the Germans come.

"Copy that--"

"Six out." Castiel passes the mouthpiece back, and there is an indistinct yell somewhere down the line, and then begins the dull, irregular drumming as four-platoon fire. Once – twice – three times – four--

The mortar shells crash to earth some twenty feet ahead of them, exploding one after the other with a deafening noise like a firework display, but Castiel can't see whether they're having any effect – he can't see anything. They didn't get the smoke grenades out fast enough, and so the trench is filled from toe to brim with a thin red haze that reduces any man further than five yards to a dim silhouette.

"Suppressive fire," Castiel yells, over and over, struggling down the trench even as he can hear *medic, we need a fucking medic* and one of the NCOs from two-platoon screaming. "Suppressive fire, stay on them – Concino!"

Concino thrusts the radio mouthpiece into his hand, ready.

Castiel shouts into it, "Baker-four-one, this is the six – repeat!" and four-platoon's mortar-men start spitting fire again, and then someone down towards one-platoon is screaming that there's a breach, that the Germans are in the fucking trench, and Castiel doesn't know what to do.

He stands with his radio mouthpiece clutched tight in one hand, his

rifle loose at his side, and he stares down the length of the trench where it zigs and zags so that he can't see the fighting beyond this fifteen-foot stretch. He can feel panic climbing inside his throat, but he swallows it down. He flexes his fingers on the radio mouth-piece.

“Sir, what do you--”

“Three-platoon,” Castiel instructs, and he lifts the mouthpiece again. “Baker-three-one, status report, come in--”

There is a crackle of static. “--six, this is ----one, we've got contact left from beyond our sentry, no other –- so far, over--”

“Cease fire, preserve ammunition – fall your men back until you have defilade, fix bayonets, and send grenadiers forwards to clear the trench, over--”

“Copy that.”

“Report if there's any further contact – over and out,” Castiel says, and he flinches away from the mouthpiece as an explosion goes off somewhere beyond above him. He reaches a hand for Concino. “Concino – one-platoon.”

Someone is screaming, but Castiel can't fucking see anything. He breathes through the terror tightening like a vice inside his chest and he gets status reports from each platoon – there are Germans inside the trench at the far end of three-platoon, and down the draw between one- and two-platoon – and he calls into battalion to report a counter-attack south of Koslar, and to ask what the hell happened to the support of the 747, except that apparently the tank platoon designated to cover them has been blown almost entirely to hell by a minefield around towards the 3rd Battalion, so there goes their heavy artillery.

Castiel pushes the mouthpiece back at Concino, and takes off down the trench towards one-platoon, shoving through the mud and the chaos, bodies moving in a frantic panic as they cough up smoke and search for German contact. Castiel shouts out, *suppressive fire, stay on them, maintain suppressive fire,* as he goes, and then there is a strangled yell, and Private Berlanti, some five feet in front of him, is fumbling desperately with a potato-masher in the mud. Castiel reels back.

“Drop it and get clear,” he yells, but it's one of the replacements – one of the new, green, fucking idiots who apparently didn't get the memo that trying to throw a live grenade back at the enemy doesn't fucking work – and he's still trying to grab it.

Castiel drops into a crouch against the wall, no time to do anything else. He presses himself into the mud, covering his head with his hands, and then it blows.

He exhales in a shaky burst, uncurling himself, and he looks upon the carnage. His stomach churns. There is little left of Berlanti, a tangle of mud and meat, and there is Private Vance with shards of the anti-personnel casing embedded deep into his face and throat, and there is Roush screaming and screaming, and there is Kesler convulsing in the dirt, blood spilling up out of his mouth and down over his chin, and there is Max Miller struggling in the mud with a blood-stained hand pressed to his stomach.

“Medic,” Castiel shouts. “I need a medic!”

He tries to calculate triage – two walking wounded who were further from the blast; Kesler Class 5, not going to make it; Vance and Berlanti dead on impact; Roush Class 2. Miller is the one who needs the attention, and yet somehow Castiel cannot get any closer. His feet won't move.

He stands there, frozen, fear crowding into his throat, and he watches Miller press shaking hands to his gut wound, and Castiel cannot make himself intervene. He should help, he knows, while he waits for a medic to get here, but he can feel the phantom hot rush of blood over his fingers, the shift of flesh and bone beneath his palms as he applies pressure, and he can't breathe. The battle is beating like a heart all around him, mortars drumming back against the ground, shells punching holes in the earth and in his men, gunfire chattering, voices raised in panic.

Castiel can't move, and he realises that if he doesn't do anything, he's going to lose him – but if he intervenes, he might still – he's going to – there is blood on his hands, and then he is nearly bowled over by someone crashing hard into him.

He staggers back as Dean shoulders him roughly out of the way, shouting, “I got him, I got him, get outta here!” Dean fiddles with something small in one hand, breaks something off between his teeth, and then jabs Miller neatly in the thigh with morphine before he stretches up to paint a wobbly M on Miller's forehead with one blood-stained finger.

Castiel staggers up onto his feet, and he breathes through the fear. He tightens his grip on his rifle. He finds his radioman, and he checks on Baker's status, and slowly they push back the German counter-attack as the smoke clears.

23rd November, 1944

Castiel trudges the length of the trench, his boots squelching and popping with every step through the thick mud.

The rain has lightened to a drizzle that hangs in the air like fog, turning his skin chill and blue-tinged, his knuckles aching, but for the first time in hours, the Germans have stopped firing. The night sky is still faintly illuminated by fire over towards the 3rd Battalion's sector, phosphorus smoke twisting whitely against the heaviness of the clouds, and the anti-artillery searchlights are immobile now, casting the world pale silver as though in moonlight. He lifts his hands to his face, fingers curled around each other, and blows into his cupped hands to try and get some warmth back, but to little avail.

He steps over Corporal Doe sleeping, Tran and Hanscum sharing a tin of cold rations in silence, Private Tilghman using the tip of a knife to pick mud from the barrel of his rifle. Instinctively, Castiel wants to tell him to stop – there is a greater likelihood that he'll just push the mud further into the barrel than there is that he'll get anything out – but he doesn't. The relentless rain and the rising mud means that none of them have been able to clean their weapons in days; it's not as though Tilghman can make it worse. There are increasing numbers of men across Baker Company whose rifles have entirely stopped working, jammed up with mud. Every time they make contact, there are cries all along the line of *stoppage* as someone frantically tries to wipe mud from their bandolier so that they can feed it cleanly into their machine-guns, or as someone battles with their cocking handle to pick giant clumps of dirt out of their ammunition clips.

Castiel makes his way past the two-platoon sentry point, and he slips in a puddle and has to steady himself with a hand on the trench wall, and he thinks wistfully of anywhere but here. A roof, four walls. He tries to picture sunshine, and he thinks he'll settle for a dry foxhole on a cloudy afternoon. He isn't asking for much.

As he walks, he catches sight of a familiar shape: a tired body half-slumped at the foot of the trench, curled around a canteen and drinking slowly, one knee pulled up to his chest. Castiel recognises the inelegant sprawl of Dean's legs, the lazy tilt of his helmet. He moves towards him.

Dean lifts his head, and he doesn't speak – noise discipline is too

carefully maintained for that – but he watches Castiel approach. Then, with his free hand, he grabs one of his musette bags and lifts to his far side, clearing a space beside him.

Castiel approaches and settles next to him, knees popping as he lowers himself into the mud, and he is so thoroughly soaked already that he doesn't even flinch when the stagnant trench water at the foot of the trench starts to seep through his pants.

Even separated by a few inches of space, that air occupied by the stink of the trenches and the drizzling rain, Castiel can feel the shivering warmth of Dean through his jacket. He holds himself carefully apart, conscious not to lean on him.

Dean wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and then he holds out his canteen for Castiel, who shakes his head.

“I'm alright,” he whispers. “Thank you.”

Dean pushes it towards him more emphatically. In what little light they are afforded by the dim reflection of the searchlights off the bank of cloud, Castiel can see his eyebrows arch. Dean says, “Have some.”

Castiel rolls his eyes, and he takes it from Dean. He uncaps the canteen and tips it back into his mouth – and then chokes. It's not water.

He splutters, swallows, and then, wincing, gives Dean a look of incredulity. “Christ. Where the hell did you--”

Dean shrugs loosely. “Tripped over it. I figure a Kraut left it behind

when they retreated."

Castiel considers this, shaking the canteen carefully from side to side to hear the contents slosh. "Their loss."

He can smell the alcohol now, acrid and sharp, and rationally, he knows that drinking this in the trenches, some hundred yards from the final German trench-line, is a fucking terrible idea – but he's wet, and cold to the bone, sitting in ankle-deep mud, on two hours' sleep in as many days. He's getting better at functioning at this level, at how to keep going when everything in him just wants to stop, but he has a migraine pulsing behind one eye, and it's getting hard to be responsible.

"You know, alcohol doesn't actually make you warmer," he points out, still slowly swilling the bottle around and around. "It just diminishes your capacity to feel the cold."

"Huh."

"It dehydrates you, too."

"How about that," Dean says.

Castiel lifts the canteen to his lips and swallows another mouthful.

It's neat liquor, and it tastes like petrol, burning all the way down. "Fuck," he mutters, his nose scrunching up. He glances over to see Dean looking at him, and in the dark, it's hard to see his expression, but he thinks he can trace the curve of his smile. He holds the canteen out.

Dean takes the canteen from him, their fingers grazing over each other, and he takes a large mouthful. After he drinks, he distractedly butts the rim of the canteen opening against his upper lip.

They fall into comfortable, distracted silence. Noise and light discipline are absolute this close to the enemy, and they've already spoken more than they should. Beyond Koslar, there is a faint hissing noise, and a red flare launches itself high into the sky, pink smoke trailing. It glitters and winks against the pale glow of the searchlights, and in the distance, gunfire begins again.

Dean passes the canteen back; Castiel takes it and drinks. The place where the metal has been heated by Dean's mouth is the warmest thing he's felt in days. He breathes in the sharp smell of the liquor and he drinks, holds it in his mouth until his tongue and cheeks sting. He tips his head back to rest against the wall of the trench as he swallows, and when he exhales, his breath comes as white fog from his lips. He hunches into himself, arms drawn in close to his torso. He closes his eyes.

“You cold?”

Castiel can't feel his fingers. “Can't complain,” he lies.

Dean huffs out his breath. “Yeah,” he says, and Castiel feels Dean settle more heavily against him, pressed together from shoulder to elbow, from hip to knee. “Me too.”

Dean holds his hand out for the canteen, but Castiel wants a little more. He drinks again, and Dean butts the back of his hand indignantly against Castiel's arm.

“Hey,” he whispers. “Come on. Are we not sharing any more?”

“You shouldn't be drinking,” Castiel says, lofty. “You're a medic.”

Dean's hand curls into a loose fist, and he hits Castiel in the arm again. “And you're our goddamn commanding officer, okay, tomay-to, tomah-to. Give it.”

Castiel tilts away from him, curling his body protectively around the canteen. “Half of the battalion's officers are drunks already,” he says, and then, without thinking, goes on: “Also, I'm not responsible for people's lives.”

Dean lets out an incredulous laugh. “Yes, you are,” he exclaims in a whisper. “And besides, there's three medics – only one of you, so.” He pushes at Castiel again. “Give me that.”

There's not much left in the canteen to fight over. Truthfully, there wasn't much to begin with, which Dean swears is how he found it. Castiel believes him, but he pretends that he doesn't, because in spite of himself, he likes Dean's belligerence, likes the way that he leans over more heavily to get his face up close to Castiel's so that he can insist in a noise-discipline-appropriate undertone that *okay, you know what, sir, fuck you*. In order to be heard at a whisper, Dean tilts in close enough that Castiel can feel the stale warmth of his breath on his cheek, and Castiel almost smiles.

Castiel takes the final mouthful, and Dean tells him it was all his own spit anyway, and Castiel whispers back something about it improving the taste, and then Dean makes a theatrical scene of tipping the last lingering drops into his open mouth, and Castiel tries not to think about tasting it on his tongue. He sits close beside him, in the freezing rain, with mud soaking through his boots and through the seat of his combat pants, and the choked sound of Dean biting back a laugh is so

golden-warm that Castiel doesn't care about anything else.

Overhead, the enemy flare gutters and fades. The darkness comes crawling back in, and down the line, Doe snorts in his sleep. Beyond him, there is the dim clank of movement – sentries switching over. Somewhere within Koslar, there is the sound of a vehicle gunning its engine, and machine-gun fire chatters out again past the far edge of their sector, and Dean settles more heavily at Castiel's side. There is combat all around them, but for now, the world is as quiet and still as it ever is.

Castiel shakes back the sleeve of his combat jacket to check the time. He can't see well enough to make out the hands precisely, but he can guess at the shape of them – coming up on oh-one-hundred hours.

He half-turns away – pressing his shoulder into Dean's chest in the process – and he glances up the line. The trench is fairly crowded, but they have five feet or so of space before the next man, who is slumped forwards over his pulled-up knees, either fast asleep or close to it. Castiel looks back at Dean, and for a second he only does that – watches the lazy nod of his head as he gradually drifts near sleep, his nose and mouth in faintly silhouetted profile, the rim of his helmet jutting.

“Dean,” Castiel says after a moment, voice soft.

Only half-stirring, Dean says, “Mm?”

Castiel pauses. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

Dean lifts his head. He lets out a small, breathy laugh. “Shit,” he replies. “Happy Thanksgiving, Cas.”

Castiel leans over until his mouth touches the cold metal of Dean's helmet, and then he stays there. It's not a kiss – nothing incriminating, if someone were to wake up and look over. It's just his face pressed to Dean's helmet, the rainwater dampening his nose and chin, and if Dean leans into him, sleepy and subconscious, then that's nothing incriminating either.

25th November, 1944

“Now,” Castiel shouts, and down the line there is the tinny click, over and over, of grenade pins being yanked, and then they pull back their arms and they throw.

From the German lines there comes unintelligible yelling, and the staggered staccato of one blast after another, smoke and mud churning darkly upwards. Then Baker peels, squad by squad up the narrow and slippery draws, and they move.

They run hard, pushing for the next trench. Castiel's breath comes short and ragged as he runs, his men a seemingly chaotic thrust up towards Koslar. At each end of Baker's front, four-platoon's 66mms thump as they fire and fire, and the enemy trench explodes with hot, white light and searing phosphorus, thick and choking smoke rising to spill over the trench's mouth.

The first one upon the enemy trench is Ash Lowell, rifle pulled tight into his shoulder and shoulder down the line of the trench as he moves, swift and steady. Just behind him is Private Colk, who takes three steps into the mud and a round through his left eye.

“Keep moving, keep moving,” Castiel yells, dropping to a knee to trace the movement of his company through his M1 iron-sight, and from the

rear, he gives his orders – one-platoon pushing left towards the pillbox, two-platoon providing suppressive fire on the trench at the foot of the pillbox, ready to switch fire on Castiel's order; three-platoon clearing towards the right, forcing the Germans back until they're up against a wall and have no choice but to submit or die; four-platoon remain in wait at the rear to cover their retreat if necessary, the length of the trench zeroed with one squad per twenty-five feet.

Bayonets fixed, Baker forces their way into the thick of the German trench. Calahee shouts in German for surrender, but it seems they don't much like the idea, as Calahee is knocked roughly back into the wall of the trench by a round through the shoulder, and then machine-gun fire starts up to scatter them like a game of knucklebones.

They advance. Private Bearcey fires and he fires and his clip snaps off as he reaches the first German, and when he fumbles to reload, he takes a bayonet to the sternum; he chokes and vomits blood, and behind him, Corporal Lowell yells and pulls his rifle up to shoot the German three times through the collarbone and throat; the German drops, and Private Vesely takes out the next man, and then there is a high German scream and someone throws a grenade.

“Take cover!” Lowell yells. “Grenade, take--”

It blows, and it punches a hole in Vesely's chest. The anti-personnel casing bursts hotly in mid-air and takes off Lowell's arm uncleanly at the shoulder. First Sergeant Masters is screaming for a medic, Privates Armstrong and Amriel on retrieval, Ted du Mort slipping in mud as he tries to reach the scene of carnage, but the Germans are pushing forwards again to take back the cleared section of trench. Gunfire cracks out sharply, and Armstrong's head snaps back. Castiel's stomach lurches, but then Armstrong is sitting upright, shaky hands going to his helmet, which has held – and then a bullet bursts through the front of his throat and he goes down again.

“Fuck,” Castiel gasps, and he twists at the waist to glance behind him, at the progress of the rest of Baker, but it's hard to gauge when the trench is cut up irregularly to prevent enfilade. Concino comes up behind him, then, with word from Battalion that Fox and Golf have made it safely into the centre of Koslar, with scarcely any resistance – and Castiel looks away at the bloodbath in his trench, and he thinks, *that doesn't sound right*, but he forgets. He has more important things to worry about.

At the far end of the trench, the Germans are not relinquishing their position, and so Baker pulls back. They collect their wounded, Dean and du Mort and Fitzgerald frantically trying to minimise losses. There is Dean, cranking a tourniquet tighter and tighter around what is left of Ash Lowell's mangled arm, murmuring, “Look at me, look at me, you're alright – you're gonna be alright, okay, it's not even that bad.” There is Nolan Fitzgerald tearing a packet of sulfa powder open with his teeth, applying pressure to a feebly spurting hole in Dewan's stomach with one hand.

They are dangerously close to being overrun. Castiel moves quickly to order retrievals – Zeddmore and Isler on Vesely, Bradbury taking Bearcey – and he slaps a hand to Dean's shoulder to get his attention. “Winchester,” he says urgently, ducking low as bullets crack past him to sink into the walls of the trench, “we're pulling back – what do you need?”

“Hitler's head on a fucking stick would be great, lieutenant – shit, Ash, hold fucking still, just give me one second, alright, I'm nearly there—”

“Now, Winchester!”

Dean sits back on his heels, rubs a hand over his mouth. He leaves blood all across his jaw and the underside of his nose, and then he points. “Get Mike outta here, and I need plasma.”

Castiel nods, and before he goes, he reaches out a hand to lightly touch Dean's arm – *thank you* and *it's done* and *keep going, you're doing well* all at once – but before he makes contact, Dean jerks sharply away. Castiel clenches his hand into a loose fist and pulls it back into his own space, but machine-gun fire is rattling louder and louder, and there is the dull thump of a mortar being fired, and there isn't time to think about it.

He grabs hold of Private Mike Shelly – slings Shelly's right arm over his shoulder, gets a hand under his thigh – and hauls him up onto his shoulder, and then he runs. He slips and he staggers back to the draw, where du Mort is waiting. Castiel lets Shelly down heavily, and then he is turning back when an ear-splitting roar can be heard overhead.

Castiel's head snaps up, and he sees what he had not so far noticed – that for the first time in weeks, the rain has let up, and the sky is clear. Brittle white sunlight comes across the battlefield as if wetly sprayed, glinting off the mud and the puddles gathered at the foot of each trench, and six B-24s come screaming overhead. They fly for Koslar, bank left, and then drop their load.

Castiel pre-emptively flinches, and the so-far relentless pace of enemy fire stutters, then cuts out – everyone watching – and then Koslar explodes.

The first blast is some thirty feet high, hollowing a grand old house with a swirling cloud of fire and smoke and rubble; the explosions that follow take out street after street with a sound like rolling thunder.

Castiel turns to Concino and snatches at his radio mouth-piece. “Baker-two-one, this is the six,” he calls over the vibrating din of their engines, a high noise quaking in his ears. “Advance now!”

They press back into the space they cleared, pushing hard with

grenadiers at the forefront, with bayonets fixed, and they move through the thinning haze of white smoke to clear the trench again.

26th November, 1944

Castiel can't have had his eyes closed for more than five minutes when the firing starts again.

He jolts instantly awake to the sound of Virgil screaming, *stand to, stand to,* and he scrambles up onto his feet, rifle in hand, helmet on. He is groggy, disoriented, his eyes unfocused, but he doesn't dwell on losing the first moment he felt safe enough to sleep in three days. He starts to run.

There is chaos throughout the trench as men scramble out of sleep and into their positions, Sergeant Milligan running between foxholes with ammunition, First Sergeant Masters yelling for stragglers to get up, get the fuck up, contact front. Castiel steadies his helmet with one hand, chinstraps swinging, as he shrugs into the other side of his webbing, and he moves quickly towards a point where he can peer up over the side at the enemy line.

To say that things have been going badly is a perverse understatement. The advance of Fox and Golf Company into the heart out Koslar was too good to be true, and have since been cut off, trapped in a handful of buildings beyond the main square. They have only tenuous contact with the COs, but as far as Castiel knows, they are still hiding out and keeping their heads down while the 111th Artillery Division defends them from the rear of the line with well-placed shells, as the rest of the 116th try to fight their way in to rescue them. It's not much of a rescue, though – for every hundred yards they advance, the Germans have counter-attacked and pushed them straight back. Baker have been crawling, inch by ,muddy inch, towards their objective, shells exploding relentlessly amongst their ranks, until they are at last in the final trench before the town itself, and as Castiel peers over the edge it seems now that today, finally, is

their chance.

His eyes flick left and right, assessing, and he does his best to tune out the sound of hasty movement behind him. He deafens himself to Garrigan's call for more ammunition, to Hester's voice shouting at the last slow few, to *where's Novak? Lieutenant Novak?* and he concentrates.

Scattered fire, muzzle-flash condensed at four immediately visible points – the building on the left, the pillbox at the abandoned trench corner, the two high windows at his two o'clock – probably more further along the line in either direction, but for now it's enough to confirm Castiel's suspicion: they are tiring. They don't have enough men to set up an effective base of fire and so they are concentrating their fire-power on the points they think are weakest. They're not wrong – if Castiel was going to attack his own line, he would focus on the same points, but there is little he can do now to fortify their position. However, there is now the opportunity to push forwards, the last hundred and fifty yards into Koslar itself.

The sound is clearer now: “Lieutenant Novak. Lieutenant Novak!”

Castiel turns to find Virgil at his shoulder, ducked low for fear of the rounds being fired from the enemy positions. “Lieutenant.”

“The men are all stood to,” he says, slightly breathless. “What are your orders?”

“Gather all the platoon-leaders.” Castiel steps down from his position overlooking the trench mouth, and he starts off purposefully down the length of the trench. Virgil keeps pace beside him. “We're going on the offensive.”

Virgil grabs two replacements as runners, sends them scrambling to retrieve Hester, Shurley, and Alistair, and Castiel digs in his combat jacket for his map case. Just towards one-platoon, there is a branch off the trench that drops down into a small dug-out, and it is here that Castiel settles on one knee to unfold his intelligence.

The others are with him shortly, and he directs their attention to the positions he has spotted, marking them on his map, and he draws short, curving lines to indicate routes of action, platoon by platoon and squad by squad. He draws arcs of fire, objectives, RVPs 1 and 2; he sketches roughly where there is potential for more enemy positions that they have no intelligence on as of yet. He thinks of how he would defend Koslar, if he had to, and he draws in minefields, gunner positions, artillery – where they should be careful. Castiel is functioning on so little sleep that his fingers jitter beyond his control when he gestures at the map, that his lines on the paper are unsteady, but it isn't important.

He lifts his head to glance around them. “Any questions?”

Alistair and Shurley shake their heads. Hester says nothing, and stares resolutely at the map with his lips pressed into a thin line, but Castiel is used to that. Virgil tilts over the map and asks, “Where are the rest of the Battalion on this?”

“I'll call in to double-check and let you know if anything changes before we move out – let's say we move at oh-seven-fifteen. If their positions are the same as last indicated, we still have Fox and Golf in here somewhere--” he points, his finger sweeping a large circle over the northern quadrant, “--Able is on our nine o'clock pushing to clear through the last of the trench system here, Charlie and Dog are round here, and we have Easy in reserve, from what I heard. 3rd Battalion is still up on the forwards slope of this ridge here, and 1st Battalion is holding the MSR through Aldenhoven. We should have the cover of the 747 and the Air Force if we need it, but they're looking thinly stretched, so we should be able to take it on our own.”

Virgil nods. “And if this push doesn't work, what's the likelihood of a resupply?”

Castiel pauses. It's a good question.

Across the map, Hester reads Castiel's hesitation like an open letter, a kind of delicious satisfaction settling on his mouth. He leans back on one heel. “We're more likely to succeed if we don't conserve ammunition,” he says.

Castiel doesn't answer. He's well-aware of that – as is he aware that if they use all their ammunition and it doesn't work, then they'll be fucked. But Hester knows that, too, and merely wants to antagonise Castiel into making a decision that's likely to get his head on the chopping block. All the same, Hester isn't wrong.

“Likelihood of resupply is low,” Castiel says, and he reaches across to take back his map, folding it smartly to return it to its case. “Be efficient, but not wasteful. We don't need to consciously conserve our rounds, but we still need to be be careful. That means no switch-fire manoeuvres. That means effective suppressive fire, not blind shots in the dark to keep their heads down. We don't need to convince them that we have more men than they do; it's a fact, and they know it.” He pushes his map-case back into his combat jacket and adjusts his rifle in its sling, loosening the strap for ease of movement. “Redistribute ammunition and equipment amongst your platoons from the men we've lost so far, and make careful decisions about how you do so. Have your platoon-sergeants keep track of how much your men are using and keep me informed. Use grenades at close-quarters, and we'll have four-platoon on us for long-range positions, but sparingly.”

Hester's look has soured, and Alistair is using his teeth to pick something out from beneath long, ragged fingernails, but he and Virgil nod.

They prepare to move, organising and reorganising ammunition, passing on orders. Platoon-leaders explain the plan to their platoon-sergeants, and to their squads, and with the sky overheard in unevenly-painted streaks of charcoal and ash, the sun rises, and it is time to go.

Castiel follows behind two-platoon, up the draw, out into the open. They call down red smoke and they move up fast and aggressive into their first position, under fire, and then there starts the heavy drumbeat of mortars firing. Castiel yells, “Take cover, clear the street,” and he pauses long enough to see Private Isler get punched back by rounds to the throat and chest, and in the moment where he is distracted by the gloss of blood spilling darkly out of Isler's mouth, the first shell hits.

The impact jarrs up through Castiel's knees, and he flinches back from the hot spray of shrapnel. Smoke churns up thick and black, and Castiel runs through, and the next shell strikes, and the next. They have to keep moving.

Two-platoon forces its way forwards, inch by inch with bullets snapping off the brickwork all around, burying a round into Turner's shoulder and Haddad's hip, and everything is the sound of violence and the cries for *medic, I need a fucking medic,* while Castiel shouts for his men to move up, move up, keep going.

Sergeant Garrigan shoots out a window, and Private Amriel hurls a grenade through the opening, and they cringe down out of the way of the blast, wood and metal and glass scattering, before they push in to clear. “*Auf die Knie!*” Calahee shouts, rifle pulled up into his shoulder and sweeping over where men pick themselves up spluttering from the rubble and smoke. “*Waffen auf den Boden, Hände dort, wo ich sie sehen kann--*”

There is a pile of maps half-covered by an oily heap of ammunition belts, and Castiel digs through to retrieve anything worth keeping –

intelligence on other positions, supply routes, traps and minefields and weaknesses. He ends up folding the pile crudely in half and shoving it into his haversack. There is one German soldier convulsing on the floor, his face swelling and twisted, chunks of anti-personnel metal embedded below eye and hairline; the others stare at him as they silently raise their hands above their heads, and his wet choking is heard over the voices of Castiel's men.

Castiel keeps moving. He finds his radio-man, calls in to each of his platoons to check on their ammunition levels – three-platoon doing fine, one-platoon running low, four-platoon conserving mortars and only firing on Castiel's orders – and then he drops back the way he came, moves to support three-platoon as they press up through Leisartstraße to clear the first row of houses. First squad pushes up through a side alley, and is nearly cut to pieces by a gunner position mounted in a first-storey window; second squad flanks and finds a rifle position set up in a temporary pillbox in an old hotel. Hester shouts for them to pull back, find another way around, and then Tilghman rushes ahead as scout and finds a mine-field.

An S-mine launches itself high in the air, breaking Tilghman's shin and kneecap, slicing through his thigh, and Castiel opens his mouth to scream, *take cover*, but before the words leave his throat it explodes. Castiel drops down into as small a shape as possible, throws an arm over his face, and he shuts his eyes as though perhaps, if he doesn't see the splinters of metal tears through his men, it isn't happening.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way, and a moment later he has to uncurl himself, get shakily to his feet, and call for them to pull back. Then, however, there is Dean.

Bandages and scissors already in hand, Dean comes running, and he sprints for Tilghman without hesitating.

“Winchester,” Castiel yells, “it's a mine-field, will you--”

There is a dull crunch as Dean steps on something, and Castiel doesn't have time to react.

All in same instant, he recognises that Dean has stepped on a mine, and that he should be shredded and bleeding already, and that it is a dud, and sick, hot terror rises in his stomach. Dean falters for a moment, realising the same, but he keeps going.

Castiel wants to tell Dean to leave Tilghman, that they can't afford more losses, that he'll call in for a minesweeper team and they'll retrieve Tilghman as soon as the area is stable enough to be sure that they aren't going to lose more people, but he knows Dean won't fucking listen, and Dean is already at Tilghman's side. From here, Castiel can't hear his words, but he can hear the low reassurance of it, the promise that everything is okay.

He settles for shouting, “Be fucking careful”, too choked up with fear and fury to say more. Dean waves a dismissive hand, barely even paying attention, and Castiel directs third squad to find another way through the gunner position holding the MSR.

Koslar is weakening. The sun rises slow and hot into the sky, bringing with it a hazy yellow day the likes of which Castiel has not seen in a long time. Overhead, the clouds are thinly stretched, greying at the edges like old cotton, but Castiel's fingers are thawing and his men are emboldened. They clear building after building, pushing through houses and stores with shattered windows, forcing their way into the town's heart. The squad that Castiel is with comes up to the next house, metal glinting in one of the upstairs windows, and they press themselves flat to the wall outside.

There is noise inside, feet scurrying over floorboards, and Castiel pauses, tilts his head over towards the window. “Thunder,” he shouts, and his hand tightens on the forestock of his rifle. The footsteps inside

have become still, but there is no response. Castiel takes a deep breath and yells again, “Thunder--” and then, upon the next silence, twisting to Corpora Harvelle at his left, “Now!”

Harvelle snags a grenade from his webbing, pops the pin, releases the lever – *one-thousand* – turns on his heels and steps back from the wall – *two-thousand* – and he throws it in through the broken window. Someone screams, and it sounds all wrong. *Three-thousand.* It blows.

Dread sits heavy in Castiel's gut.

He pulls his rifle tight into his shoulder and he leads the way in. He kicks the door open hard and pushes in, and for a moment his eyes sting with the twisting smoke and brick-dust, and then his gaze focuses past the smashed furniture, the over-turned table, the shattered ceramic, and he sees the little girl pressed into the far corner.

“Shit,” Harvelle says.

For a moment, Castiel can only stare at her. Knees pulled up in front of her; shaking hands over her ears. Her face is grubby and tear-streaked. She is maybe seven years old, and there is blood in her hair.

He pulls off his rifle sling and drops his M1 to the ground. He crouches down.

“Hi,” he says, voice soft. “I'm sorry. I didn't know you were in here.” He doesn't know what else to say – there is no good way to apologise for ordering a grenade into what you thought was an enemy position and nearly taking out a child.

Her eyes, wet with tears and shining like coins, don't leave him once.

“Forgive me, my German is terrible,” he tells her. “*Guten tag*. Where are your parents? *Deine Mutter* – where is--”

“Sir,” Harvelle says behind him, moving cautiously; his foot creaks on a floorboard and the girl cringes back against the wall. “There's intel on that back table.”

Castiel's eyes flick up, and there – a map. “Seen.” He pauses. “I'll get it.”

“Sir?”

“Find a radioman and get onto Battalion about what we're doing with civilians,” Castiel says, and he carefully eases himself down from a crouch to sit on the floor. He crosses his legs in front of him, pretzel-style, and he unclips his helmet to set on the floor beside him. “*Mein Name* – Castiel. *Und*... I don't suppose you speak English, do you?”

The girl stares back at him, silent and trembling.

Castiel tilts his head back towards Harvelle. “And get me a translator.”

He waits with her while they bring up Calahee from two-platoon to speak to the girl, explaining that they aren't going to hurt her and that she must be so scared but she's been very brave and they're going to take her somewhere safe so that she can wait for her family. Calahee has a gentler manner with kids, and speaks to her quietly, and lures her out from her corner so that she can be carried out and down towards Battalion. Calahee hoists her up onto his hip, and she presses

in against his chest, but her head twists to look at Castiel, and she watches him as he is carried away. Castiel lifts a hand and waves.

“Lieutenant Novak?” Concino's voice shatters the quiet. “I've got the S-3 on line one, sir, wanting a status report.”

Castiel takes the mouth-piece.

Baker keeps moving slowly up street by street, and Castiel tries to shake off the fear that there is a frightened child in every one of those buildings, that every mortar he orders is destroying more than mere enemy positions – he swallows it down. He can't afford to think like that. He smoothes a hand over the top of his rifle, checking the clip, and he tightens his grip.

By twelve-hundred-hours, the sun is high and hot enough that Castiel could be forgiven for forgetting that it was November. By thirteen-hundred, most of Baker's sector is clear, and there is the steady rumble and crash in the distance of the 747's heavy artillery bombing the 115th's sector into dust, and Baker are coming together, squad by squad, to establish defensive positions.

The town is by no means captured, and it is certainly not safe, but for now Castiel allows himself to relax. They made it – his risky decision not to conserve ammunition paid off. He allocates up a cas-evac route back to the trenches and towards Battalion, sets up a command post, establishes comms between companies, and he gets First Sergeant Masters among the men collected so far from their various objectives, to check ammunition and equipment, while Dean and the other medics check on casualties, reporting any to Battalion for an evac to the aid station if needed.

Castiel walks a slow route between his men, and gradually, he comes down. He breathes more easily, still vigilant, and he tightens his hands

into fists as the trembling starts up, first in his thumbs, then spreading through his whole hand. As he walks, he glances around the buildings surrounding their position, and it's the strangest thing, completely out of nowhere, but he looks over the street, and as he maps their first line of defence in the captured buildings, his eyes fall on a line of narrow rectangular windows, grubby cracked white windowsills, and he thinks he has seen that somewhere before.

In his throat, on his tongue, is the dry grit taste of smoke and brick-dust, and there is the sun beating down hotly upon them, clean and yellow, thick as melting, in a way he hasn't seen since Normandy.

The sense of deja vue that grips him is sudden and unexpected, and somehow his body freezes rigid even as he keeps moving. He's going to lose him.

His ears are ringing as though with mortar-fire, a quaking noise that pitches up and down, and he can't see quite straight. He stares ahead, and can't make any sense of it. He stumbles, and panic tightens like a fist around his throat, his body running cold, and he realises that he's going to lose him. He can't breathe. Something terrible is going to happen and he can't do anything to stop it and he's going to – he's going to – his hands are bloody. He can't breathe.

Fuckin'--

Castiel is going to lose him. Distantly, he is aware that he is still stumbling blindly forwards, wet mud sliding underfoot, the sun on his helmet and the squelch of his boots, but all of it is gone from him.

--butcher, Cas, don't – Jesus--

All he knows is the rasping, rapid drag of his own breathing, out of

control, and terror jagged in his chest, and there is blood on his hands. All he understands are his own two hands, the shift of bone beneath the skin, and everything else is detached, fuzzy in the details. He has to get to safety. He has to – he's – going to--

Gradually, something breaks through the indistinctly blurred edge of Castiel's understanding. Someone is speaking to him, the words unclear but the tone of it low and reassuring. He tries to breathe normally, but his breath snags in his chest over and over, and the world is coming apart around him and he can't get control of the desperation and panic seizing inside him.

“--hear me? Lieutenant.” The voice is becoming clearer now. “Hey. Hey, it's me. Come on, sir.”

Castiel slowly comes to realise that there is is a hand anchored on his elbow.

“It's me, okay. I'm right here – you're right here with me. Cas? Hey, come here. Look at me.”

With a great effort, Castiel drags his eyes up to find Dean standing close beside him.

“Hey, that's great, Cas. You're doing great.” Dean's voice is gentle. “Look, it's me. I'm here. You're right here with me. Everything's okay. Come on, Cas, talk to me.”

Castiel swallows around a knot in his throat. He feels as though there is blood in his mouth. He manages, voice strained, “I--”

Dean's thumb is rubbing slow circles over Castiel's arm, steady and soothing. “Yeah, like that. Come on. You're okay. Just look at me, right here. I'm right here.”

Blindly, Castiel's hands are reaching for Dean. One finds him, twisting into the fabric of his sleeve; the other hovers, lost, between them. He is still breathing too fast. His voice comes to him as through from someone's else mouth: “Dean--”

“Look at that – you're doing just fine.” It is hard to focus, but Dean's voice is comforting. There is a strange sensation, something moving over Castiel's head. He realises, detachedly, that Dean has unclipped and removed his helmet, and Dean goes on speaking softly. “I'm right here. You're safe, alright? I'm right here with you, sweetheart, just keep breathing. How many fingers am I holding up?”

Castiel can't concentrate. His head is spinning and he is breathing slower now, but he can't shake free of the dread he feels all through his body, fear clinging to him like oil to his skin.

“Come on. Humour me. How many fingers?”

Castiel blinks, and he blinks, and slowly he focuses on Dean's hand in front of him. “Three.”

“Great. What else can you see?”

“I--” Castiel swallows, and he tries to concentrate through the haze. “A – there's a house. A park. Trees.”

“What kind?”

Castiel bursts out, “I don't know, I'm not a fucking botanist.”

Dean laughs. “You're alright. Come on. Describe one.”

“It's – tall,” Castiel manages. He can feel that he is coming back to himself now, his ears no longer ringing with mortar-fire but able to pick up voices in the streets beyond them, gunfire cracking out further beyond their sector, footsteps, someone speaking German. The sound of Dean breathing. Tension still pulls tight between his shoulders until every muscle in his body aches with it, and he realises that he is shaking. “Green. Deciduous. I don't know – spiky. Wooden. Jesus.” He rakes a hand roughly backwards through his hair. “Fuck. Fuck, I'm a fucking Section 8.”

“You're not. You're fine.”

Castiel takes several slow, shuddering breaths. He bends double, resting his hands on his knees, and he closes his eyes tightly as he tries to recalibrate. It is the twenty-sixth of November, a little after thirteen-forty. He is in Koslar, in the Rhineland, in Germany. He is Baker Company's commanding officer, and Brest is some nine-hundred miles behind him. He feels as though he is still there.

From that position, he asks Dean, “Where is Baker?”

“We're just short of RVP-1 right now, off Leisartstraße, and--”

“I know where I am,” Castiel says sharply, jerking upright. “That's not what I fucking asked you.” He means to glare at Dean, but he catches sight of his face – tentative, worried – and he can't look at him at all.

Dean says, “Baker is past RVP-1. One- and three-platoon have set up an all-round defensive position there while two- and four- check nearby buildings – looking for a harbour area, I think. They're not far.”

Castiel stares down the street, through the rubble and smoke, and he tries to fight down the urge to run, take cover, curl up in a ball in as small as space as he can. Baker are safe – that's what is important. He should go back there, but his grip on what is around him is still shaky at the edges, and he doesn't trust himself not to lose it again. He flexes one hand, stretching his fingers until his knuckles crack.

After several long moments, Castiel says, “I'm sorry.”

Dean looks over at him. “For what?”

Castiel clears his throat. “Sorry I snapped. Sorry that you – that you had to--”

“It's okay. It happens.” Dean shrugs, dismissive, and Castiel looks across at him. He has his hands in the pockets of his combat pants; his musette bag looks heavy on his shoulder. There is dark grit in his eyelashes, and mud on his lips, and someone else's blood cresting up from his jaw. “I mean. My dad used to get like that sometimes. When I burnt a grilled cheese sandwich, or--” He pushes the toe of his boot through the mud. “After my mom, you know. So. I get it.”

Castiel takes a deep breath, still steadying himself. He tries for the technique of self-distraction. “How is your father?” he asks.

Dean tips his head over to one side, as though hoping he can

physically deflect Castiel's questions. “He's fine.”

“You've heard from him, then,” Castiel says. “I know he was – absent. For a time.”

“Yeah.” Dean snorts. The sound of it is somewhat bitter. “Yeah. No, he got carted back by the black-and-whites, so he's... great.” He half-twists at the waist, and glances back over his shoulder in the direction of RVP-1, as though in impatience. “We should really get back.” He turns back to Castiel. “How are you doing now?”

The instinct is to lie. “Fine.” Castiel regrets it the instant it's out of his mouth. “Mostly.” He swallows hard and makes himself honest. He says, “I don't know,” forcing the truth out, and his voice is strained.

Dean falters. His expression changes – by turns, startled, then confused, and then something in him seems to stretch taut and unforgiving, and he looks away. Castiel can still see his old softness in the set of his mouth; a muscle pulses faintly at the hinge of his jaw. He watches Dean's throat work to swallow, and then he says, “Cas, I – I can't--”

“Lieutenant Novak?”

The shout rises from amongst the smoke at the far end of the street. Castiel's head snaps across to follow the sound, tracing the route that the speaker will take in order to reach him. Lieutenant Shurley appears as a silhouette against the crumbling brickwork, striding purposefully. Castiel looks back to Dean, and reaches a hand for his sleeve, but Dean steps away and Castiel's hand falls short.

Castiel's hand hovers awkwardly in the air between them, and then he makes an embarrassed retreat. He fiddles with the hem of his sleeve

instead, and then with the zip of his jacket. It takes him a moment of silence pulling thinner and more brittle between them to find the courage to speak. “Dean,” he says. “You were--”

“You gotta go, sir,” Dean says, and the words sound hollow in his mouth. He holds out Castiel's helmet for him.

“Right.” Castiel swallows. He's not good at unpicking the tangle inside his chest, much less at explaining it to Dean, and so he feels the distance between them like a change in the weather, but he doesn't say anything.

27th November, 1944

Winter is blue on the horizon, and Koslar is clear. Castiel, meanwhile, has more paperwork laid out in front of him than he knows what to do with, but he is not getting any of it done, because he is trying to work out what he has done wrong. He shakes his sleeve back to check his watch – oh-nine-hundred-sixteen hours, and Major Singer wants to see him at oh-nine-thirty, alone.

He sits cross-legged on the floor on company CP with an ache in his knee where it has never quite recovered from its encounter with Dean's fury, and he tries to concentrate. He has action reports and equipment resupply requests and maps laid out in front of him in a neatly organised semi-circle; he has eleven letters of condolence still to write, and he has to reshuffle some men in two-platoon due to sustaining heavy losses in last few days. He has too much work to allow himself to be distracted.

Maybe it's to do with Hester. At some point, Hester will have reported to battalion about their disagreement at Setterich, and they are going to reprimand him for his treatment of supporting officers. It's anything, but nothing that he can't deal with – he can explain to the

S-1 what happened and he'll see Castiel's perspective, and technically, Castiel is in the right anyway, even if he did lash out at Hester in an unprofessional way. Unless it's nothing to do with Hester – then what? Maybe one of the other platoon-leaders reported him for his recklessness in ordering the men not to conserve ammunition when they pushed into Koslar. Maybe it's his defiance of orders on the initial assault, when he set his company a new objective once he realised how impossible the original objective was. Maybe all these hundred small defiances are adding up; maybe they think he has grown too big for his boots. He runs through the possibilities: not being aggressive enough on actions, not filing his reports fast enough, Dean. He feels a cold sweat prickle at the nape of his neck. Dean. The hug in front of half of one-platoon, the extended absences – they've finally raised suspicions. Or someone has seen them. Or Dean has told someone. Or they knew all along and were biding their time.

Castiel can feel sweat sticking his undershirt to the small of his back. He checks his watch again – oh-nine-twenty-one.

He gives himself another three minutes of staring vacantly at his paperwork before he gets up, knees popping, to head for battalion CP. He slings his rifle over his shoulder and takes a moment to neaten the front of his combat jacket, somewhat fruitlessly, as he is covered almost head-to-toe in mud. He's also overdue for a shave and a shower, and he hasn't changed his socks in over a week, but at this stage, he feels there is little he can do make himself presentable. He tries not to over-think it. He breathes, and he rubs a hand distractedly, over his jaw, and he goes.

“Sir,” he says, when he pushes through the door of a small house just off Friedhofstraße, inside which is a large desk, a broken cabinet piled high with crates of equipments and loose sheafs of paper, and Major Singer. Castiel clears his throat. “You wanted to see me?”

“Ah. Yes. Just the man I was looking for.” Singer raps his knuckles decisively on the top of his desk, and then goes routing through a drawer. Castiel starts to come to attention, but before he can straighten up fully, Singer waves a dismissive hand. “As you were,

Novak.”

Castiel removes his helmet apprehensively, and pushes a self-conscious hand backwards over his head to try and fix his hair. He makes a surreptitious attempt to rub some mud off the front of his helmet so that at least the insignia of the Blue and Grey is visible.

“How are your men, Novak?” Singer asks as he rummages.

“They're well, thank you.” Castiel tucks his helmet his between his elbow and hip.

“No more combat fatigue?”

Castiel squints. “No, sir.”

Singer nods, seemingly satisfied. “Good. Good.” He goes on digging until at last he makes a harrumphing sound under his breath, and he comes up triumphant. “Here we are.”

He comes around the edge of the desk, approaching Castiel in three short strides, and he thrusts a small dark box at Castiel, who takes it with some trepidation.

“Congratulations, captain,” Singer says, before Castiel has even had a chance to open it.

Castiel stares at him, bewildered, and then he cracks open the box to see a silver double bar, glinting dully in the lamplight. “Sir,” he says,

lifting his head to look at Singer.

Major Singer steps forwards into Castiel's space and flips up the collar of his combat jacket to remove his single silver First Lieutenant stripe. “You've done a fine job with Baker,” he says as he works. “Taking over as company commanding officer on D-Day is a hell of an ask, and you not only held that those men together but have performed admirably on a number of occasions throughout the campaign – through Saint Lô and Brest and Aachen, to name a few, and now into the Rhineland. And Koslar wasn't easy either, so. You deserve this.”

Castiel holds his breath, keeping carefully still to prevent Singer from stabbing him in the collarbone with the pin, and he presses his lips into a tight line as he tries not to visibly inflate with pride.

“Thank you, sir,” he says. “It's an honour and a privilege.”

“You'll stay in command of Baker – you're doing grand work there. But if you keep this up, I could see you as a battalion commander in a few years.”

In an instant, Castiel forgets the stress and the sleep-deprivation and the crushing weight of responsibility that wakes him up at night. He forgets that he hates this, and he is swept up in the possibilities – Major Novak; Lieutenant Colonel Novak – and he is seventeen years old again, reading the pamphlets on Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning and imagining what it would be like to leave Bedford behind. “Thank you, sir,” he says again.

Singer smoothes his hand over Castiel's collar, and then folds it back over so that the pin is concealed. “There you are,” he says. “Keep up the good work, captain.”

He steps back and Castiel straightens up, brings his foot over to come smartly to attention, chin tilted high. “Anything further, sir?”

“No, that'll be all. Thank you, captain.” Singer comes lazily to attention, and gives him a curt nod. “You're dismissed.”

Castiel falls out. He pushes out into the street, setting his helmet back onto his head as he lets the door swing closed behind him, and he works with distracted fingers at clipping the chinstrap. *Captain Novak,* he thinks, keenly aware of the new pin as though he can feel its weight, and then he catches sight of a tall, broad-shouldered figure walking on the far side of the road.

At first, Castiel is hesitant, recalling Dean's previous reticence, and for a moment ten different worries play through his mind – he has done something to anger Dean; he has unknowingly reverted back to old habits, and has been pushing Dean away without realising; Dean is simply tired of him. However, before Castiel can make a decision about how to proceed, a curious smile lifts on Dean's face, and he calls across, “What the hell happened to you, sir? You're smiling.”

Castiel squints as Dean crosses the road to meet him. “Am not.”

“Are, too.” Dean settles in front of him, and he folds his arms over his chest. He has a handful of folded paper in one hand. “So what gives?”

Castiel tilts his head over to one side. “I went to see the S-1.”

“Oh, yeah? What for?”

Castiel lifts his eyebrows, his look knowing, and he feels the start of a

smile threaten at the corners of his mouth. “I wish I could flip down my collar and show you, but I'd probably get shot,” he says, cryptically, and he watches as Dean's grin spreads wider.

“Well, shit. You got the promotion, then.”

Castiel nods, and he can't help himself – his own smile widens in echo of Dean's.

“Captain Novak, huh,” Dean says. He has mud so engrained in his skin that Castiel can see nothing of his freckles; he is grimy and sweaty, his hair growing out long around his ears and dishevelled beneath the headband of his helmet. He is filthy, and he smells terrible, and somehow in spite of it Castiel is as stuck on him as ever. “That's gonna take some getting used to.”

“It is,” Castiel agrees, and it must be the giddy delight of the unexpected good news that has Castiel this light-hearted, but he drops his voice low, the nearest he can do to seduction, and says, “Maybe you can help me get used to it.”

The sound of Dean's laugh is sweet and warm. “Captain,” Dean says, theatrically scandalised. “Are you making a pass at me?”

“Say *captain* again,” Castiel says.

“Captain.”

Castiel's smile grows until he can feel his eyes crinkle at the corners.

The town is busy around them, noise floating from every direction – the rumble of a scout-car, voices raised in argument, a half-intelligible officer barking orders to men on parade, runners moving crates of equipment back and forth, commanders establishing harbour areas and supply routes and action orders. To the east and north, the 1st Battalion are working through the remainder of the enemy pillboxes in Koslar in search of traps and intelligence, while the 3rd Battalion take it easy in reserve, and the 2nd take up defensive positions within the city to hold it from any German counter-attack. Baker are divided amongst five sentry points, and Castiel needs to be among them, but for once things are calm, here, and thin wintry light is shattering off windows and the oily metal of an 88mm being stripped on the street corner, and it makes Dean's eyes impossibly green.

“I bet this means you can kick my ass now,” Dean goes on.

Castiel rolls his eyes. “Winchester, I could always kick your ass.” At some point, Dean has taken a step closer, leaving less than a yard of space between them. Castiel doesn't much mind it.

“Careful, sir, that's fighting talk.”

“I should hope so,” Castiel says, and he raises his eyebrows. “How else am I supposed to keep you in line?”

“I thought it was something about respect for your authority,” Dean replies, his mouth tilting up at the corner to turn his smile arrogantly close to a smirk.

Castiel is half-conscious that they are just standing at the side of the street, looking at each other, and they both have work to be doing, but neither of them are moving, and he doesn't care. He is smiling in a way that is rare for him these days, and Dean is looking at him like he's worth something, and the air between them is for once clean.

“Maybe now that I have more authority you might actually listen to me.”

Dean laughs again. “Shit, sir, I don't know about that. I figure you'd have to climb the rungs pretty high for that.” He tips his head over, as though considering it. “Try out *General Novak*, and maybe I'll stop giving you shit.”

Castiel shakes his head. “Well, at least in your eyes I know that I still have a long career ahead of me once all this is over,” he says.

Dean's smile fades.

They both fall into silence like settling cloud cover, sunlight dimming, and Castiel opens his mouth to say something, but then there is a voice at his shoulder.

“Lieutenant Novak?”

Castiel turns to see Lieutenant Naomi coming up behind him. “Naomi,” he greets. “Is everything alright?”

“Sir, it's Captain Novak, now,” Dean says.

Castiel glances between them, but Dean's expression is unreadable. He is smiling again, but the curve of it is brittle.

“Oh, is it?” Naomi nods, for all appearances politely interested. “Congratulations, then, captain. I was wondering if I might discuss

with you some news I've heard from Battalion about future transfers."

"Of course," Castiel says. He turns back to Dean. "Winchester, I'll--"

"Understood, sir. See you later, sir." Dean nods respectfully at Castiel first, then at Naomi, as some approximation of a salute, and then he turns and heads off down the street before Castiel can say anything else.

For a moment, Castiel stares after him, his brain spinning as he tries to work out what just happened, but Naomi is starting to speak to him about the possibility for internal transfers within the 29th Division, as well as transfers potentially between other divisions as they prepare to move up towards Jülich, and Castiel can also see First Sergeant Masters coming purposefully up the street towards him. There is too much to worry about besides Dean, and so he doesn't. With everything in him, he does not think about Dean.

28 th November, 1944

Baker Company and the rest of the 2nd Battalion have been pulled back as far as Engelsdorf, in reserve, while the rest of the 116th clear out any remaining German positions, and as tedious as it sounds, Castiel is grateful for the opportunity to catch up on administrative responsibilities – and more grateful still for the fact that they are billeted in abandoned buildings all along Lerchenweg.

For the first time in weeks, Castiel is dry, if not warm, and he has the chance to change his socks. They have lost a crushing number of men to trenchfoot since they left Baesweiler, and so every billet company CP and the sentry linking Baker to Able is now overflowing with the ripe scent of soldiers airing their feet. First Sergeant Masters goes along throwing shutters open and complaining, *you disgusting fucks, one at a time,* but Castiel pretends not to notice.

“Afternoon,” Castiel says, ducking his head under a broken beam as he steps into the billet of two-platoon's first squad. “Everything alright?”

There comes back to him a half-coherent chorus of *fine, sir, doing alright, sir, not bad, how about you, sir,* and Private Tran says, “Sir, Don claimed the top bunk when I already had my haversack on it, and I want him court-martialled.”

Inelegantly draped across the top bunk, Private Hanscum rolls his eyes, and Sergeant Milligan calls across the room for Tran to shut the hell up, and Castiel says, “I'll be sure to let General Gerhardt know.” Over the last few operations they have been losing men and gaining replacements like the steady push and pull of the shore; much of the company has had to be rearranged, and so it seems there are some who are still having trouble settling into their new positions within Baker. He looks across the room, assessing. “Where are your defensive positions?”

From where he is sprawled in the back corner with a notepad propped against his knee, Corporal Sorento points. “Those two windows, and there's a door out back.”

“That door?” It's only to keep them in practice of being in a tactical position, but it doesn't mean they need to take it any less seriously.

“Yes, sir.”

“That leads into Able's sector. Barricade it; keep your focus this way.”

“Yes, sir.”

Milligan hops down from his bunk, stretching his arms behind his back until something cracks, and then he shakes out his arms and approaches Castiel. “Sir,” he says.

“Sergeant?”

“I was just wanting to ask if you know when we're moving out,” he says. “A couple of us were thinking about doing a little calisthenics – to warm up--” From one of the other bunks, Private Torrence snorts a derisive laugh, and Sorento, sat beside him as he sorts through his meagre rations, mutters something unsavoury under his breath. “--but we don't wanna tire ourselves out if we're gonna in the field the day after, sir.”

“That's understandable,” Castiel says. “You'll be fine for calisthenics. I'm assured that we'll be given forty-eight hours notice as to our next movement, and I haven't heard anything yet – although I might recommend doing it tonight, instead of tomorrow, just to be safe.”

“Sounds good, sir,” Milligan says.

“Do you know where we're gonna be moving to, sir?” Hanscum asks, without lifting his head.

“I'll let you know as soon as I do,” Castiel says. “For now, you have as much information as I have.” It's not strictly true – Castiel knows that they will most likely be moving out in the next few days to continue pressing north towards the Roer river and Jülich on its far bank – but there's no need to confuse them with incomplete intelligence.

“So not Berlin, sir,” Tran surmises with a grin.

“Not yet, I don't think so.”

“But I've been polishing my iron-sights and everything, sir.”

“Ready for Mr. Hitler to stumble into your sight-line,” Sorento says drily, without looking up from his notebook. “I feel safer already with Kevin Tran keeping me safe.”

Castiel turns back to Tran. “Keep it up, private. I'm sure we'll run into him soon.”

“Thanks, sir.” Tran looks over at Milligan. “Does that mean we're definitely running tonight then?” he asks, despairing.

Milligan grimaces. “Looks so! Alright, I gotta go tell the rest of the guys, then. Thanks, sir – permission to be dismissed?”

“Yes, sergeant. That'll be all.” Castiel looks around at the rest of them as Milligan neatly sidesteps him and goes out into the street. “Do you all have everything you need? Rations, ammunition, cigarettes?”

With a melodramatic groan, Hanscum drops his arm over his eyes, and Tran says solemnly, “Sir, Donald is feeling real delicate on the cigarettes front.”

Castiel nods. “Duly noted. More cigarettes.” He glances over at Masters. “First Sergeant, how is that resupply report coming along?”

“Bullet-point one: more cigarettes,” Masters says.

“I'm going to need more than that,” Castiel tells him. “From all platoons. You have until--” he takes a look at his watch, “--nineteen-hundred hours.”

“Aye-aye, cap'n.”

Castiel barely suppresses an eye-roll when Tran and Hanscum start laughing, but he supposes he should have seen the pirate jokes coming.

He checks on a subsection from each platoon, spread out amongst billets as they are, and he tracks down Hester, Alistair, Virgil, and Shurley for any action write-ups on the push towards Koslar. He lights up a cigarette and smokes it down to a stub as he collates what information he has so far into rough notes for his own report, and he goes to see Major Everett at Battalion CP, who tells him in no uncertain terms that he has until twenty-two-hundred to have all his reports in. Castiel is approached by no less four different replacements who are lost and can't find their way back to CP – two of them are not even in his company, he realises, after a long and alarming few minutes where he stares at them and tries frantically to remember what platoon they are assigned to – and four-platoon's radios all spontaneously buy the farm.

Suffice to say, he is kept busy, and when Dean comes to find him with updates on the casualties after their initial treatment at the Battalion aid station, Castiel, with his second cigarette of the hour held to his mouth, makes a quick calculation of what time he has available now that he is waiting on paperwork from Masters and Shurley. He doesn't look up from his sheafs of paper, and distractedly pinches his cigarette away from his lips as he says, “Winchester, I need your assistance with the sorting and distribution of some new medical supplies at fifteen-hundred-hours.” He keeps his pen moving to maintain the illusion of productivity, but he is not writing anything; he is colouring in the

vowels on Lieutenant Virgil's action report. “Do you know where the supply base is?”

“The one out past Fox's southern sentry?” Dean asks.

“That's the one.”

Dean clucks his tongue against his teeth thoughtfully. “Well, sir, I got a shift at the aid station fifteen-thirty. So, uh.” He clears his throat. “Depends how long you want me for.”

Castiel's eyes flick up to meet Dean's over the edge of his papers, and he considers him. Dean has some of the mud rubbed from his face, in the smeary way of a man with cold water and no soap; his scar is raised, now, starkly pink through the dirt. Underneath the grime, the dark stains of blood flecked along one cheek, his expression is quietly earnest. Castiel amends, “Eighteen-hundred, then.”

Dean tilts his chin up in a hands-free approximation of a salute – respectful, except that the only thing cockier than the arch of his eyebrows is the smug, exaggeratedly solemn way he says, “Yes, captain.”

“Alright. You're dismissed – and get that look off your face.”

“What look? This is my face, sir.”

Castiel gives him a disparaging look that is equal parts *fuck off* and *you're not cute*, and he flicks the embers of his cigarette at Dean when he lights up with a laugh, his smirk broadening to a grin that rocks him back on his heels.

He runs inspections, of quarters and of weapons-cleaning, and he starts his report with what information he has so far, and he reviews his maps and starts building a sand-table in company CP of the land towards the Roer to familiarise himself with the territory they might be pushing through next. He eats a can of cold rations, and he struggles for fifteen minutes to transpose part of his map across to his sand-table, but ten miles are an incomprehensible mess of mud and blood, and so he walks across to Fox Company to borrow one from Gabriel. He has the basic outline of the contours and MSRs by fourteen-thirty, and at fourteen-fifty-two, Castiel informs Virgil that he is IC, and he moves for the Battalion supply base.

If he has this planned out as carefully as he thinks, then the main supply room will not be in use for a little under an hour and a half. His own company are divided between calisthenics and navigation exercises until nineteen-hundred-hours; Able and Charlie are leading patrols out to the west of their respective sectors and are not due back for at least another hour, while Battalion staff are occupied in a briefing rear of the line with the rest of the Division. Fox and Golf are taking it easy somewhere beyond Engelsdorf after their extended encounter with the forces at Koslar, and Easy and Dog are in defensive positions to the north until it is Baker's turn to take over from them at twenty-one-hundred hours. They have time – not much, admittedly, but enough. Castiel will take what he can get.

The supply room is locked, but he has a key, courtesy of the S-2. He pushes inside, sets the key into the lock on the inside, and leaves the door unlatched.

Castiel pulls his rifle sling over his head and carefully sets his rifle down on the floor, propped against one of the shelving units. He unclips his helmet's chinstrap, and rubs a hand over the place where the rough canvas has chafed at the edge of his jaw. He calculates again – if he allows himself forty minutes to be with Dean now, that leaves him with twenty minutes before Masters' report is due, and a few hours still free to complete his own paperwork for Battalion staff.

He goes to check his watch, and then the door at the end of the supply room opens, and in comes Dean. He's on time – no, Castiel realises, as he finishes lifting his wrist to check the time, he's *early*.

“Dean,” he says. “This is – punctual.”

“Hey, sir. You don't need to sound so surprised.” Dean turns the key in the lock, and then twists back to face Castiel. He holds his hands out, palms-forwards, either side of his body to frame his hips; his smile turns wicked. “Where do you want me?”

Castiel points towards a wooden crate a the end of a row of shelves. “If you start sorting through that box first and count out packets of sulfa powder for me to record, that would be a great help,” he says.

Dean's face falls. His hands drop to his sides. “Wait. We're actually--”

Castiel raises his eyebrows.

“Huh.” To his credit, Dean doesn't complain. He wipes his hands on his combat jacket; if anything, he seems to make them grubbier for it. He heads over to the crate, and as he goes, he mutters, “We need to work on some kind of signal for when you want to meet me for '*work*' versus when you actually want me to, you know, work.”

He drops to one knee beside the crate as he pries the lid off, and is carefully setting the lid off to one side, tipped to rest against the side of the shelving unit, when he notices that Castiel has made no move to join him. He pauses, and he glances up, and that is when he sees – Castiel, still stood in the centre of the room, one hand in his pocket, with a half-smile slowly tugging at his mouth.

Dean sits back on his heels, realisation blossoming gradually across his face, and then his mouth splits into a disbelieving grin.

“You fucking asshole,” he says, and Castiel can no longer hold back his own smile, now wide and crinkling at the corners, and Dean picks up a packet of sulfa powder to hurl at Castiel's head.

Castiel attempts to duck away from it, but Dean's aim is good, and it bounces off his ear. “Be careful,” he tells Dean, with an attempt to keep his voice clipped and authoritative, even as his hands come up to protect himself from the next sulfa packet. “We need those! Dean. Dean! You'll break them, or lose one--”

Dean drops the remaining sulfa packet still in his hand back into the crate, and he stands up, crossing the room to reach Castiel in four long strides. “You're an asshole,” he says again, softer now, with the lessening space between them.

Castiel is looking at his mouth. “I've been trying to tell you that for months,” he says.

“Oh yeah?” Dean says. He removes his helmet, drops it carelessly to one side. He takes another, small step into Castiel's space, and his voice drops low, intimate. “Tell me again.”

Castiel pulls him in by the straps of his webbing and kisses him.

Dean huffs a low, throaty laugh against Castiel's mouth, and then he has his hands on Castiel's hips to steer him backwards, through the shelving units to the far back of the room, where they're out of sight of the front door and the single window. Dean keeps pushing and pushing until Castiel's back hits the wall with a thump, and then Dean pins him by the hips, kisses him open-mouthed, tongue hot and

urgent.

Castiel unclips Dean's webbing, unzips his jacket, and shoves both back over his shoulders. They get tangled at his elbows so that Dean has to let go of Castiel for a moment to shrug his arms free, and in that time Castiel settles his hands on Dean's body. He relishes these moments, Dean without the full heaviness of his combats, so that Castiel can feel him – his solid chest and shoulders, his thick arms, his soft stomach, the crest of his hipbones. Castiel presses closer into him until they're flush, chest to pelvis, his hands grazing over Dean's waist and sides, and he sucks Dean's lower lip into his mouth.

Helmet off, webbing undone, Castiel drops his extra layers to the floor at his feet, and his hands are eager as he fumbles with Dean's belt, the button and zipper of his pants, pushing the fly wide and pushing his underwear down over his hips – just far enough to pull Dean's cock out, half-hard already. Castiel rubs his palm over the head, thumbs over the slit, until Dean's breath snags and his hips pulse forwards into Castiel's touch, pressing him hard into the wall. Castiel smiles against his skin.

“Okay,” Dean says, his breath already coming rough. “Yeah, you're an asshole.” He works his hands between them, tears at Castiel's combats until he gets them open, and he take Castiel's cock in hand, teasing over the head and at the vein underneath until Castiel shudders against him, his mouth falling open on a breathless sound. His hips pitch forwards into Dean's fingers, but then Dean gets both hands properly into the waistband of Castiel's underwear, pushing it further down until Castiel almost stumbles, feeling ridiculous with his pants around his knees, and then Dean says, “Come on.”

Dean drops to his knees, then back onto his heels, and then tilts so that he's sitting on the floor, and he holds out his hands for Castiel.

An embarrassed heat starts up on Castiel's jaw, that he is standing there with his cock out, flushed and hard, while Dean sits on the floor

more or less perfectly composed. Castiel shrugs out of his own jacket, ignoring the November cold, and then he drops down to straddle Dean's thighs, one knee either side of his hips.

Castiel feels ridiculous. He says, “Hi.”

“Hi,” Dean says back, and then he wraps his hands around the backs of Castiel's thighs, and he flips him.

Castiel lands hard on his back, almost winded, and he only has a split-second to frown up at Dean, now leaning over him with a smug expression, and think that somehow he's found himself stuck on a duplicitous smart-ass, and then Dean grinds forwards against him, and Castiel doesn't much mind.

Dean's weight bears down on Castiel, presses him into the floorboards, and the physicality of him, tall and heavy and solid, the thickness of his cock nudging Castiel's hip, simmers hot under Castiel's skin. He feels almost crushed beneath Dean and still he wants him closer.

Castiel spreads his legs to better let Dean fit between them, but his pants are still tangled around his knees and he's trapped. He kicks at his own heel, trying to toe off his boots without using his hands, as Dean presses forwards and kisses him again.

Dean's tongue slides over Castiel's, slow and languid, and Castiel lets out a small sigh, surrendering himself to it, mouth open and chasing Dean's lips. He struggles distractedly with one boot, and manages to half free himself, his combat pants hanging off one ankle, too tangled up around his boots to kick off completely, but he doesn't care. He can pull his knees up now to make room for Dean between his thighs, so that their hips slot together, and he grinds up against Dean at a slow, excruciating pace that leaves him dizzy with want. Dean lets out his breath in one shaky burst against Castiel's mouth.

Castiel cups a hand around the back of Dean's neck to pull him in close, licking into his mouth all slow heat, and then he gets his other hand up to Dean's face, cradles his jaw, pulls back just far enough to sweep his thumb over Dean's bottom lip. Dean's mouth falls open on another trembling breath, and then he curls his hands around the backs of Castiel's thighs, hauling him up to drag him closer so that their hips rock together hard.

They kiss, their motions turning loose and uncoordinated with heat, Castiel dragging his lips wetly over the corner of Dean's mouth, kissing his lower lip, his tongue slipping over Dean's. Every point of contact between them is electrified, Castiel feeling Dean's nearness and his desire like a static charge, and he wants him so fucking badly he can't think of a single thing else.

He has one leg in the air, one foot bootless in a grimy sock, the other tangled in his combat pants and underwear, and he must look obscene, but all that matters is the sound that Dean makes when Castiel reaches down to slip his hand over the head of Dean's cock, spreading the thin gloss of pre-come over his palm and pumping lazily, fist loose. Dean whines in the back of his throat and pushes his forehead against Castiel's, breathless.

Then Dean puts his hand up to Castiel's mouth, but his fingers are darkly stained with mud and God knows what else, and Castiel pulls his head away.

“Your hands,” he says, breathing ragged, “are fucking filthy.”

Dean jerks one shoulder dismissively. “Clean as they've ever been,” he says, and he pushes the first two fingers into his own mouth. Castiel watches as he sucks on them, his eyes caught on the round pink shape of Dean's lips around them, the flash he is afforded of Dean's tongue as he pulls them out wet. Then Dean reaches down and rubs the pads of

his fingers over Castiel's hole.

Castiel's breath catches, and he throws his head back, throat working to swallow. His hand stutters as he jerks Dean's cock, teasing a hitched noise from Dean's own mouth, but Dean's touch is fleeting, no more than a graze, and Castiel is impatient.

“Come on,” he says, lifting his hips towards Dean. “Come on.”

“Thought you were worried about hygiene, sir--”

Castiel hisses through his teeth, “I swear to fucking God, Winchester, I'll--”

“Alright, alright, I'm getting there,” Dean says, and he leans forwards to kiss the hollow of Castiel's throat as the tip of his first finger pushes slowly inside.

Castiel's whole body tenses, but he is getting used to this now. He rolls his shoulders back into the floorboards, closing his eyes to help him relax, and he rocks his hips slowly against Dean's finger. He focuses on the unsteady music of Dean's breathing, the way that Dean's hips are moving now to fuck shallowly into Castiel's fist; he focuses on the slow build of need, low in his gut.

Dean moves incrementally, pulling out to push back deeper until he's buried to the first knuckle, and Castiel wants more. “Yeah,” he says distractedly, drawn towards the faint burn of it. “Yeah – keep going. Keep--”

Dean presses in hard, and Castiel's words trail off into a thinly-

stretched sound of want at the faint burn of it. He glides his free hand up over Dean's shoulders, slides down between his shoulder-blades and then back to cup Dean's head, pulling him into a kiss.

Castiel licks into Dean's mouth, the kiss hot and slick, Dean's tongue setting Castiel's every nerve ending on fire, lifting a shiver on his spine. Heat curls low in Castiel's stomach, cutting his breath ragged, and then Dean crooks his fingers inside Castiel's body in a way that seems to light him up. It's just a brief thing, a pulse, but Castiel wants it again. He rocks down against Dean's finger, and Castiel feels it again, something short and electricity-charged, a heaviness in his gut that reminds him of needing to piss except that it leaves him open-mouthed and wanting. He tips his head back against the floorboard, a low noise rising in his chest as his hips roll up into Dean's hand, and his fist tightens around the head of Dean's cock.

“Fuck,” Dean says, his voice little more than a rumble in his throat, his breath coming rough, and when Castiel pushes his hand up backwards through Dean's hair, drags it down over Dean's chest, Dean shudders, his hips shifting restlessly to push his cock faster into Castiel's hand, his motions sloppy with need. He presses his face into the side of Castiel's neck, his breath hot and damp against Castiel's collarbone, and Castiel can feel the wet shape of his mouth when he groans, “Cas – fuck--”

He pushes in with a second finger, and the dull burst of pleasure when Dean curls those fingers is sharper now, hotter. Castiel comes up off the floor, back arching, and then Dean works his free hand under one of Castiel's thighs to hoist him up again. Castiel lets out an involuntary gasp at being lifted so that his ass fits against Dean's pelvis, so that he can feel Dean's hipbones in the backs of his thighs. The angle is awkward now, Dean's cock slipping from Castiel's grasp, and instead Dean grinds, gasping, up into the curve of Castiel's ass as he fucks two fingers roughly into him.

Castiel can feel the slick of the head of Dean's cock as it rubs over his tail-bone, and he rocks back hard onto Dean's fingers – three, now, Dean uncurling his hand to fill him up, to stretch him wide and burn a

wild heat beneath Castiel's skin so that he feels he can barely through how badly he wants and wants. He can hear himself mutter *yeah, fuck, fuck, please, please, please,* and then Dean's fingers shift again inside him, and white-hot pleasure comes spiralling upwards through Castiel so fast and sharp that a moan breaks out of him beyond his control.

“Jesus, Cas,” Dean says, his voice wrecked. He has sweat glinting in the divot of his collarbone, shining along the column of his throat, and Castiel aches to taste him. He is breathing ragged, chest heaving, and he gets his hands fisted into the front of Dean's undershirt to drag him down – kissing him first, all tongue and teeth and wet heat and absolutely filthy. Then he noses under Dean's jaw to sweep his open mouth over Dean's skin, to scrape his teeth over his pulse point and to suck at the hinge of his jaw, to drag his tongue over his Adam's apple until Dean's hips jerk and he lets out an makes a broken sound of want that forms words only halfway through - “Fuck, oh – Cas – yeah – fucking--”

He pushes his fingers into Castiel, and Castiel rolls his body into the touch, fucking himself hard and fast on Dean's three fingers, just rough enough that the feeling skirts near to pain, but he wants more. God, he wants so much – he wants Dean the way he always wants him, but the constancy of it doesn't make it any less overwhelming. He wants Dean more firmly between his thighs, the solid weight of him, and he wants Dean's cock instead of his hand. He wants Dean to push inside him and fuck him hard enough that Castiel can feel it in his teeth. He wants to feel full – whole – and he wants Dean falling apart with him, shaking to collapse into thoughtless pleasure, until there is nothing but the two of them, their bodies, the way that they move.

He wants, and he wants, and then Dean rubs over something inside Castiel again that has him letting out all the breath in his lungs, and without meaning to, he gasps out, “Dean, fuck--” His voice is sandpaper-rough, breathless and wrecked. “I want you to--”

“God, I wanna fuck you,” Dean bursts out, before Castiel can even finish. “Jesus – I wish I could--”

“Do it, fucking do it.” Castiel's hands grab blindly at Dean, seeking out his hands or his body - anything – and he is all thrown into chaotic, unintelligible want, because part of him is focused on the way that Dean shoves his fingers hard into Castiel, the way that he moves his fingers just right so that Castiel can barely breathe through how good it feels, and the rest of him is thinking that he could have more. “Do it – just – fuck, please--”

Dean's fingers slide out of Castiel, leaving an emptiness that Castiel's entire body protests, but then Dean is fumbling with the open fly of his combat pants, pushing them down past his thighs.

“Fuck, are we really--” Dean starts, his hand curling around his own cock.

“If you hurry the fuck up,” Castiel gasps, “then yes,” and he has his fingers digging bruises into Dean's hip, his waist, as he tries to pull him in, and then Dean falls forwards. He plants a hand solidly on the floor beside Castiel's head, his other hand tight at the base of his own cock as he pants and steadies himself, and then he pushes forwards.

Castiel has his breath pent-up inside his breath, and he lets it all out in a sharp burst, because there is zero give at the blunt head of Dean's cock shoving forwards, just a building pressure that shifts increasingly towards pain. Maybe they're not doing it right, Castiel thinks, and then he thinks that maybe he has to be patient – but it doesn't feel like anything is happening.

Castiel grits his teeth against it, tilts his hips up for better access, and pushes back against Dean, but pain blooms up through him fresh and sharp, and he hisses, “Fuck,” between his teeth. “Fuck – no, fuck – stop, stop.”

Dean becomes instantly still. “Cas?”

Castiel slumps, and Dean's cock slips away, bumps against the back of Castiel's balls. He exhales, slow and shaky, and his disappointment is so tangible he can almost taste it in the back of his mouth. He waves a hand, irritated and dismissive. “Just – this--”

“Isn't working,” Dean finishes.

“No.” Castiel casts his gaze away, upwards, and tries to bite back the frustration that rises sharply in his throat. He forces himself to breathe, and he pushes both hands backwards through his sweaty hair, until a distraction comes in the form of Dean slipping his hands under each of Castiel's thighs and hauling his ass up again. Castiel glances down, startled. “What are you--”

His voice cuts out as Dean starts to kiss down the inside of his thigh, mouth wet and open. There is the slight scrape of Dean's teeth at the juncture of thigh and pelvis, the heat of his tongue slipping over the skin at the base of Castiel's cock, and Castiel twitches up to meet him.

“Dean,” Castiel bursts out, voice breathy.

Dean hums into Castiel's thigh to indicate that he's listening, but Castiel feels the vibration through his cock and it snags his breath in his throat. “Got an idea,” Dean says, voice muffled against Castiel's skin.

“Yeah?”

“Benny said he did this to his girl once.” Dean opens his mouth over

the soft inside of Castiel's thigh, sucks, scrapes his teeth over it where it aches. “Drove her crazy.”

“Winchester, I don't know if I need to say this to you,” Castiel says, bewildered, “but I'm not a girl. I don't think you can just--”

Dean shoulders his way under Castiel's thighs until his arms are bracketed by Castiel's knees, and Castiel only manages to say, “Christ, Dean, what are--” and then Dean ducks his head and kisses behind his balls, sweeping his mouth down over Castiel's hole.

Castiel jerks in surprise, a choked noise rising in his throat, and his hands fly to Dean's head to stop him, because what the fuck is he *doing* – except Dean's mouth is hot and wet and busy lighting Castiel up with a frantic need Castiel has never felt before. There is the drag of his lips, the warmth of his breath, the insistent press of tongue.

“Fuck,” Castiel manages, the word drawn out long and strangled, his back arching up off the floor, and he feels his thighs tighten instinctively around Dean's head. “Fuck--”

It's all at once too much and not enough. Castiel wants more and more, and every touch makes him shudder out of control against the floorboards, a shiver climbing the length of his spine. Dean reaches up and takes one of Castiel's hands, guiding it down to cup his balls out of the way, and then Dean's tongue is sweeping over Castiel's hole again, slow and firm, and Castiel feels like he is coming apart.

Everything is sloppy wet heat, slick and filthy and fucking obscene. Castiel can feel wetness on the inside of his thighs, in the crack of his ass where Dean is spreading him open, and he can only imagine what he must look like now as Dean licks over the skin behind Castiel's balls, as his tongue pushes at Castiel's hole, and Castiel makes a noise that he has never heard before, something low and dirty in the back of

his throat.

Between Castiel's thighs, Dean's shoulders flex and roll as he presses in to lick deeper into him, tongue curling, and Castiel can't help himself; he writhes. He rolls his hips desperately up into Dean's touch, one hand scrabbling at the floorboards for purchase while the other curls into Dean's hair.

Dean is slowly but surely opening him up, and then Dean is using his grip on Castiel's thighs to spread him wider, tilting his hips up, and his tongue is pushing inside him, shallow fucks that coil heat so tightly around the base of Castiel's spine that he struggles to breathe through it. There is no cogent thought in his brain besides needing more, and he lifts his hips up into Dean's tongue, shoving back against his mouth to get Dean deeper, barely noticing the burn in his leg and back muscles.

He can hear a low, shaky noise vibrating in his throat every time he inhales, and he doesn't know how to make it stop. However, that soon becomes the least of his concerns as Dean lowers one hand from Castiel's thigh and pushes a finger into him to the first knuckle, alongside the insistence of his tongue, and Castiel catches himself on the tail-end of a burst of *fuck oh fuck yes yes please* that comes tumbling incoherently out of his mouth. He lifts his hips into Dean's hand, and Dean slides deeper, and Castiel moans.

Dean makes a hitched, low sound into Castiel's skin, and for a moment the pace at which he fucks Castiel with his finger stutters, and Castiel looks down to see him red-faced and reaching for his own cock.

Castiel tries to find the words to get Dean to hold off, to say that he wants to be the one to make Dean shiver and break, that he wants to taste it as he gets pushed over the edge, but Dean's finger crooks inside Castiel and the only noise he can make is a broken, wordless sound of want. He can see Dean's hips shifting as he fucks into his own hand, and the idea that this is getting Dean so hot that he can't hold

off on touching himself sears new need underneath Castiel's skin.

He fits a hand to his own cock and can't hold back on the groan that breaks out of his mouth at the first touch. He's already so close it hurts, so fucking close. Castiel jerks himself fast, hips rolling up into his own hand and then snapping back down to let Dean fuck into him with his tongue.

“Fuck, please – Dean – yeah, keep – please – fuck, just like – like that, Dean, fuck--” Castiel has no idea what's coming out of his mouth, but he can hear that his voice is scratched hoarse, words coming out in fractured bursts between each gasp.

He has one hand so tight in Dean's hair that his knuckles whiten, the other sliding fast over his cock as he jacks himself, and the need is building hotly inside him until he can't concentrate on a fucking thing else, and then he bursts out with, *fuck, Dean, please, I need, I need you,* and it hits him. A strangled noise breaks out of his mouth, and his hips snap up off the floor as he comes over his wrinkled, grubby undershirt.

Castiel is dazed, breathing heavy, and Dean is still going – still fucking Castiel with his tongue, mouth hot and slick, still twisting his finger inside him so that Castiel is hit by a punch of heat that overwhelms him, over-sensitive, and he tries to close his mouth over a sound that rides embarrassingly close to a sob.

“Hey – Dean,” he manages, and Jesus, he sounds obscene, his voice rough and low. He releases his grip on Dean's hair, his knuckles aching as they relax, and he tries to grab Dean's head to pull him up. “Fuck, Winchester, come here.”

Dean lifts his head just far enough to bury his face into the inside of Castiel's thigh, his mouth dragging wet and open over his skin, and

Castiel can feel his teeth when he rasps out, “I'm so – fuck, I'm close, Cas, I'm--”

It's ridiculous, the idea that Castiel just received one of the best orgasms of his life and that Dean, by comparison, is content to jack himself off afterwards. Castiel stretches and uses his socked foot to jab Dean's ribs, and when Dean jerks in surprise, Castiel grabs a handful of his shirt collar and uses all his strength to haul him upwards. Dean comes easily, but inelegantly, his knee nearly catching Castiel's in the balls, and only just manages to get a hand out beside Castiel's head to support his weight. He is red-faced, and his cock hangs heavy between his thighs, his pants pushed down almost to his knees.

Castiel glides his hands down over Dean's sides, gets under Dean's shirt and jerks it roughly up under his armpits. Dean hooks his thumb into the back of his collar to yank it over his head, as Castiel uses two hands on Dean's waist to steer him up higher, and Dean just gets his head and one arm out of his shirt when Castiel leans up on one elbow to kiss Dean's ribs.

In a voice that is strained, Dean says, “Cas, come on, man.”

Castiel takes him apart slowly.

He kisses over Dean's chest and stomach, teeth grazing after the slow sweep of his tongue, mouth open. He has one hand steady at Dean's side to thumb at the crest of his hipbone, to scrape blunt nails over his waist, and he lowers his other hand, still slick with his own come, to Dean's cock. Castiel touches him lightly, taking his time, because Jesus, Dean is fucking beautiful like this, flushed pink with want and gasping, and Castiel doesn't want this moment to end. He wants to know Dean, every inch of him, kissing up his sternum, nosing at his collarbone, dragging his wet mouth across to Dean's nipple and kissing him there.

All the air in Dean's lungs escapes him in one shivering burst, and his hips push blindly forwards, his cock slipping through Castiel's hand, and the noise he makes at that is low and delicious. They go slow, Castiel licking over Dean's nipple, kissing him open-mouthed until Dean's arms, planted either side of Castiel's head, are locked at the elbow and shaking.

Castiel can't see Dean's face, buried as he is in Dean's chest and his flushed, freckled skin, his trembling muscles and laboured, shuddering breaths, but he knows he's painfully close. He rocks his hips shallowly forwards into Castiel's touch, the head of his cock wet and shining with pre-come where it bumps Castiel's fingers, his grip loose and teasing.

Dean is quiet, the way that he goes when he can barely breathe through the heat, and Castiel knows that he'll have his tongue tucked into the corner of his mouth, that his forehead will scrunch up in the middle as he concentrates, that he'll drop his chin when he's too close – and there it is, Dean craning to push his face into the top of Castiel's hair.

Castiel can feel, under his hand, when Dean's stomach muscles tighten, when his back tenses, and Dean is breathing fast. They go slow, Castiel's fingers trailing over the vein on the underside of Dean's cock, grazing under the head, his thumb sweeping gently over the tip. Dean makes a tiny sound in the back of his throat, something high and strangled, like a whine. His hips are moving without rhythm now, his motions juddery and tight; his cock in Castiel's hand is hot and hard, and every tiny shift of Castiel's loosely curled fingers pulls a sigh from Dean's mouth.

He is too far gone to speak, having already been close to incoherent when he was only jacking himself between Castiel's thighs, and now he is shaky through from his shoulders to his legs. Castiel sucks a faint bruise on the swell of Dean's pectoral muscle, scrapes his teeth over the aching mark. He kisses his skin. They go slow.

Dean is on his hands and knees over Castiel, shaking and unsteady, and Castiel can feel a fine tremor in the small of his back. He is inhaling in gulps, the sound of his breathing wet and desperate. Castiel licks over Dean's nipple, and he tightens his hand around Dean's cock to jerk him fast and purposeful. He jacks him twice before Dean goes rigid, breath snagging in his chest, and he comes.

Castiel feels it hit his thighs and stomach, hot and wet, and his own cock twitches half-heartedly against his belly, and then he has approximately three seconds to breathe and relax before Dean's elbows buckle and he collapses on top of Castiel with all the grace of a freight-train.

In an instant, Castiel's head is crushed by Dean's chest, his nose flattened to the point of pain. “Fucking – Christ, Dean--” He wiggles to get his arms free, and he gets his hands underneath Dean's shoulders to help push him up until Dean can prop himself up on one elbow.

“Shit,” Dean says, sounding wrecked. “Sorry.” He eases his weight slightly off Castiel – shifting enough to let him breath, but still leaving their legs tangled – and Castiel sees that his eyes are red.

Castiel blinks, startled. “Dean, are you--”

“Fine, I'm fine.” Dean pulls his head away. He clears his throat, rakes a hand backwards through his hair, and then – almost as an afterthought – he wipes roughly at his eyes with the back of one hand. “Just, uh. Shit, I don't know. That was – uh. Fuck.” He takes a moment, his eyes shut tight. “Yeah.”

“But you're alright,” Castiel says, concerned, and one of his hands come up of their own volition from Dean's shoulder to cup the edge of his jaw, thumb grazing over Dean's cheek. “Dean? You're—”

“Yeah,” Dean says again, and he opens his eyes. His voice is still rough; he sounds as though he has been cracked open and hollowed. “I'm alright. That was just – weird.”

“Weird?” A frown pulls at Castiel's face, worry still coiled tight in his gut. “What was weird?”

“That. You, uh.” Dean doesn't say anymore, and if it weren't for Castiel's ever-building anxiety that something is wrong, he would think he should commemorate this moment somehow: Dean Winchester, speechless. Dean swallows, and tries again. “I dunno. Never done it like that. Like – slow.”

Castiel looks at Dean, the hesitant way that he tilts his face into Castiel's touch, and for a moment he is silent as he tries to process the fact that in spite of all Dean's cocky expertise, no-one has ever treated him with tenderness. Castiel's eyes flicker over his face, taking in the colour on his cheeks, the way he avoids Castiel's gaze.

“Dean,” Castiel tries, his hand shifting to more closely fit his palm to Dean's jaw, his fingertips pushing into Dean's hair. “If I overwhelmed you, I--”

Dean lets out his breath through his teeth, slow and shaky. “Cas, it's fine,” he says. “I swear, it was a doozy, you just – caught me by surprise. Jeez. Gimme a second.”

“But you're alright,” Castiel says again, more firmly this time, and he catches Dean's eyes and pins him there.

“Yeah.” Dean meets his gaze with an expression that is quiet, soft;

there is something in his eyes that makes Castiel's chest ache. “Yeah, I'm alright.” He leans forwards, and Castiel realises that he is about to be kissed.

Without thinking, he pulls back away from Dean – and Dean freezes. It plays only across his face: the confusion, the rejection, the sharp slap of hurt.

“No, Dean, I--” Knowing that Dean's next move will be to pull away, to protect his injured pride and close himself off and pretend it doesn't matter, Castiel pushes back before he has the chance. He tightens his hand on Dean's face, reaches up with his other hand to smooth back Dean's hair from his forehead. He holds him still. “I just – I know where your mouth has been.”

For a moment, Dean stares at him, his forehead screwed up with a frown that closes him off from Castiel, but then slowly it eases, his features softening, and understanding blooms slow across his face. He snorts an ugly laugh. “Fuck,” he says, and he scrubs at his mouth with his knuckles. He wrinkles his nose. “Yeah. That was – fragrant.”

Castiel drops his head back against the floor with a hollow *thunk*. “Shut the hell up,” he says, breathless.

“You should bottle that. Eau de Novak.” Dean drops his head to butt his nose against Castiel's collarbone. “It'd sell for sure.”

“No-one asked you to do – whatever the hell that was.”

Castiel can feel Dean's smile against his skin, and he's willing to put money on it being arrogant and smug. “You weren't complaining a second ago.”

Castiel rolls his eyes, but he doesn't argue that point. His hands settle on Dean, one curled around his bicep where he props himself up over Castiel, one tracing idle shapes on Dean's hip. They must look fucking ridiculous, Castiel with one shoe and no pants, Dean shirtless with his pants around his knees, their stomachs sticky with come where they lie pressed together. Castiel is fairly certain his undershirt is now in no fit state to be seen by anyone, and if his hair is anything like Dean's, then he won't be able to take his helmet off for some time either. They are sweaty and greasy and debauched, and when Dean finally unpeels himself from Castiel to get up, their eyes meet almost shyly.

Dean sits back on his heels to hitch up his combat pants, fiddling with the zipper and button, and Castiel steels himself. He can feel saliva and come all all over his ass and the inside of his thighs, and when he tries to move gingerly to sit up, the sensation that accompanies the movement is awful, cold and wet and slippery.

Grimacing, Castiel flops back down. “Fuck,” he mutters, and he casts his eyes heavenward in search of help, because he has absolutely no doubts that Dean is going to be completely unbearable. “I hate that I'm actually going to say this, but--” He takes a deep breath. “I need some help. With my ass.”

Dean bursts out with an ugly, faintly villainous-sounding cackle. “Aha! So it's true what they say about officers.”

“Winchester, go fuck yourself.”

“Oh, with this mental image, I will,” Dean says, and as he stands up, he tunnels his hand, crudely flicking his wrist back and forth in front of his crotch. “This is gonna get me through the lonely nights for sure--”

Castiel scowls, and he stretches for his stray boot, of a mind to direct it at Dean's head, but before he can grab it, Dean kicks it out reach, and cocks his eyebrows sharply.

“Sir, anyone ever tell you that you got a poker face like an open hand?”

“You are such a pain in my ass,” Castiel retorts.

“Oh, really?” Dean smirks, eyebrows arching. “Because the way you were going about it earlier, I gotta say, I thought I was doing a pretty good--”

Dean is interrupted by a timid knock on the supply room door.

They both freeze immediately – Dean standing bare-chested with his shirt in his hands, Castiel sprawled on the floor, naked from the waist down in one boot. They don't breathe.

Nothing happens. They stare at the door, waiting for someone to try to push it open, or worse still, to get out a key and unlock it, but the silence stretches longer and more tense until Castiel thinks he might have a heart attack, and then there is another knock – louder this time, but hesitant.

From outside the door there comes a nervous voice. “Uhh,” it says first. “I'm looking for Captain Novak.”

Castiel recognises that voice – Bradbury. His eyes flash across to Dean, accusatory, and finds Dean relaxed, pulling his shirt over his head.

“No idea if he's in here,” Bradbury calls, his voice high and exaggeratedly innocent. “Just... checking random places. Randomly. Just in case. But if he is in here, on his own, doing supply stuff, then, uh, Lieutenant Virgil is looking for him around company CP.”

Dean smoothes his shirt over his stomach, and then he digs through the pockets of his combat jacket until he comes up with a semi-clean rag of cotton, which he balls up and tosses in Castiel's direction.

Castiel catches it. There is blood in one corner, and a mud hand-print distinct on one side, but it's as good as he is likely to get, and so he sets about trying to clean himself up.

“Okay,” Bradbury's voice comes through faintly. “That's all from me. Uh. Bradbury out.” There are dwindling footsteps on tarmac, and then Castiel turns a hard look at Dean, who is steadfastly avoiding eye contact.

“Bradbury knows,” Castiel says slowly, and then, the more important part: “You told Bradbury.”

Dean huffs all his breath out, and shrugs into his combat jacket, somewhat aggressively. “It's fine, okay,” he says, impatience in his tone. “Anyway, I don't see that it's such a big deal – you told Lieutenant Wallace--”

It has been months, but the mention of Inias' name still flares up hot inside Castiel's chest, grief instantly sharpening to anger. “I didn't tell Inias anything,” he says sharply, a hot flush of embarrassment edging his jaw, which only irritates him further. He screws up the ball of now-damp cotton and hurls it at Dean's head, who ducks out of the way. ““He had known I was queer since I was fifteen – he figured me

out almost the instant I saw you. It's different--”

“--and anyway,” Dean goes on, talking straight over him, “I don't see how you expected Charlie not to figure it out, seeing as I had to ask him to pretend to beat the shit out of me – remember?” He meets Castiel's eyes, then, and it's a challenge. “To cover up the fact that you did?”

Castiel balks. “I didn't mean for you to--”

Dean sighs. “Jesus, Cas, there ain't a whole lot of subtle ways to go about the conversation. *By the way, pal, my commanding officer punched me in the head four times and I need you to take the fall for it. But don't ask where or when this happened, or why it was that we were alone in the first place, or why the L.T would behave in such an unprofessional way, or why I'm defending him* – I mean.” He throws his hands in the air. “What the hell did you want me to say?”

Castiel stands up, and he glares at Dean, but it's difficult to convey the ferocity of his wrath when he is also pulling up his combat pants from where they are tangled around one ankle. “So you just...”

“I didn't tell him outright, but you know. He gets it.” Dean jerks his head towards the door. “And I figured if anyone should have to find us getting horizontal, it should probably be someone who already knows. Someone we can trust.”

Castiel stares at him. “Can we?”

Dean sighs. “Yes. We can.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because Charlie's not an asshole, and doesn't want me to get court-martialled?” Dean rolls his eyes. “Look, Charlie's got his own shit he's keeping quiet. He made a point to tell me about it – you know, as a sign of *trust*.” He lays the emphasis on thick, eyebrows raised. “He's not gonna tell anyone, and if he does, he's as fucked as we are.”

Castiel's eyes narrow. “What do you mean?”

Dean rubs a hand down over his mouth, and Castiel can see his hesitation in him, the uncertainty, and so Castiel knows that something is coming but he doesn't know what to expect.

Dean says, “Charlie's a dame.”

Castiel stares at him, uncomprehending. “What are you talking about?” His frown pulls down lower and lower. “That's impossible – he wouldn't have been declared 1A. Someone would have noticed, he can't--”

“Or at least,” Dean goes on, his words careful, “he thinks so.”

Castiel stops halfway through his sentence, and he watches Dean, trying to work out if this is a joke. No – Dean's expression is sincere, if slightly awkward. Slowly, Castiel says, “I don't understand.”

Dean exhales heavily, puffing his cheeks out. “Yeah, me either, really,” he admits, and he tilts back to lean against the edge of one of the shelving units. He pushes one hand into the pockets of his combat pants; with his other hand, he idly tucks his undershirt into the

waistband. “I don't know what to tell you.”

“So. He's queer, too.”

“Not exactly?” Dean's face scrunches up at the brow and mouth. “He still likes women. I don't know, I don't really get it, but fact is, he's some kind of fruity, whether or not he's – I dunno, your garden variety homosexual or not.”

Castiel doesn't answer for a moment. He just looks at Dean, studying his expression, watching his languid, easy movements as he smooths a hand down over his chest and stomach to more neatly tuck his undershirt. Dean's hair is in total chaos, sticking up in clumps and spikes; he passes a hand over the top of it, seemingly to flatten it, and doesn't make much of an improvement.

At last, Castiel says, “He told you that?”

Dean nods. “When he figured out me and you. He told me, so we had equal leverage. So I'd trust him to keep quiet.”

“So what do I do?”

“Nothing? Just – don't blow a fuse on me.”

Castiel says slowly, “Am I supposed to say anything?”

Dean snorts. “Yeah, sure, if you want him to start up a conversation in front of the whole battalion about all the times you and me have

fucked - be my guest."

Castiel flushes hotly.

"I don't know much about it either, but Charlie doesn't want anyone to know, so what I figure is he's still just regular old Private Charles Bradbury." Dean pulls up the zip of his combat jacket, and stoops to retrieve his webbing from the floor, and then he hesitates."Whoever Charlie is when, uh – she's at home. I don't know."

Castiel stares at him, watching as he fastens the belt of his webbing, as he retrieves his helmet from the floor and palms it onto his head. Dean's eyes flash up to meet Castiel's, then, and Castiel looks away. He pushes his socked foot into his stray boot, and crouches to pull the laces tight.

After a long moment, Castiel forces himself to say, "I'm sorry." He's getting better at it.

Dean lifts his head.

"For not trusting you," Castiel clarifies, without looking at him. He concentrates on blousing his pants over his boots, carefully tucking the fabric.

"It's fine," Dean says, after a beat. In his peripheral vision, Castiel sees him shrug. "I mean – don't take this the wrong way, but I always got the sense you don't trust all that much anyway."

Castiel's fingers still on his boots. He swallows. He admits, "Not with this. But all the same, I should trust you – I do. And you trust Bra--"

He stops himself. “You trust Charlie. So.”

“Okay,” Dean says. “Sure.”

Castiel gets to his feet, slow and halting, and he senses more than he sees it, when Dean stops moving and just looks at him. “You have always tried to take care of me,” he says, and he feels somewhat as though he is shifting hotly within his own skin. “At times, when I didn't deserve it. You have prioritised my needs over your own even when it would serve you better to leave me alone.” His uncertainty registers in his gut as an unpleasant curling of nerves. He cants his head over. His voice drops soft. “I only wish that there was some way I could be that for you.”

Dean looks at him sharply. “Well, I don't need that.”

Thinking of Dean in rage and in grief with Benjamin Rosen's blood on his hands, and of the shape of his mouth when Castiel accidentally admitted to having thought about their future, and of the unsteady pitch of Dean's breathing when someone finally treated him with care, Castiel says, “Alright.”

Dean keeps going. “You know, I don't need you trying to take care of me. Or trying to be fucking gentle with me, or whatever the fuck that was,” he says, and he jerks a hand roughly in Castiel's direction, and Castiel knows he means the slow reverence of Castiel's kisses. “That ain't what I need from you.”

Castiel asks quietly, “So what do you need from me?”

Dean's eyes turn to Castiel, and his expression is a challenge in a way that Castiel has seen before – Dean expects him to already know the answer. It catches Castiel off-guard, and he stares him down, and he

relives their every word, their every touch, and he doesn't know what to say.

With every passing moment, Dean grows more closed-off, straightening up tall. His mouth thins, and beneath the hardness in his look, there is something in him that seems small and lost. Finally, Dean drops his eyes. “Forget it,” he says, and he goes to retrieve his musette bag from the floor by the next row of shelves.

Castiel follows him with his eyes. “What is it?”

Dean hoists his musette bag up and shrugs into it. “What's what?”

“Your problem,” Castiel says, and he deliberately makes it provocative – he turns his voice cold and sour, almost condescending. It's what Dean would call a shitty play, but it seems to work.

Dean lifts his head, irritation flashing across his face, and he lets out all his breath in a single burst. “Jesus, I don't know,” he says, and then it all goes wrong, because this is the point where Dean is supposed to push back, annoyance turning his mouth loose so that he can actually tell Castiel what's wrong. Instead, Dean levels him with a hard look, and he says, “What answer will make you quit bugging me?”

Castiel flinches, his mouth falling open. He feels Dean's dismissal like a slap.

“I--” he starts, and gets no further. He swallows, and gives a curt nod. “Of course. I didn't – forgive me.” He gestures loosely, untethered. “I'll leave you to it.”

He turns away, feeling stung, and he starts to gather up the rest of his clothes and equipment, but as he continues redressing, he hears Dean sigh. “Shit. Cas – wait.”

Castiel doesn't stop. He pulls his jacket on, yanks the zip roughly up to the neck, and puts on his helmet. Behind him, there are footsteps, slow and hesitant, as Dean approaches.

Dean comes in close into his space, and for a moment, he just stands there, close enough that Castiel can see in his peripheral vision the rise and fall of his breathing beneath his heavy combats. Castiel goes on waiting, wary and tense, his shoulders tight, until at last Dean clears his throat. “Sorry.” He reaches out, bumps his knuckle awkwardly against the edge of Castiel's jaw. “I just – give me some time.”

“Time,” Castiel echoes, without looking at him.

“Yeah.” Dean's thumb skims along Castiel's jawline, and against Castiel's better judgement, he leans into the touch. “I don't know. I just – I'm not sure where I am right now.”

Castiel turns his head to meet Dean's eyes. “Germany.”

Against all odds, Dean laughs.

Drawing courage from Dean's smile and the gentle graze of Dean's thumb over his face, Castiel goes on, “I can give you our coordinates, if that will help.”

“Thanks,” Dean says, amusement colouring his voice, but there is

something soft and quiet underneath. “Yeah. Maybe.”

He lowers his hand from Castiel's face, but his gaze doesn't waver, and the way he looks at him makes something in Castiel's throat tighten.

At last, Castiel says, “I can give you time.” He wants to reach out to Dean as a gesture of comfort, to touch his arm or the back of his hand, a tangible sense of *I'm still here. I'm not going anywhere.* He balls his hands into fists and keeps to himself. “Take as much as you need.”

Dean swallows. “Thanks.” He pushes both hands into the pockets of his pants, and the smile that he gives Castiel, then, is small and fleeting. He heads out first, unlocking the supply room door and striding out into the winter sunlight, and Castiel stays a moment longer, watching the broad-shouldered shape of him retreat into silhouette. Worry runs rabbit-footed through him.

He straightens his jacket, fastens the chin-strap of his helmet, and he picks up his M1 from where it leans against one of the shelves. He shoulders the sling, letting the weight of it rest at his hip.

29th November, 1944

A smoky afternoon falls swiftly into a twilight the colour of bruised knuckles, clear of clouds and cold. The 116th have moved up from Engelsdorf to Bourheim, ready to continue the push towards Jülich. Already they have their next objectives: a series of strongholds on the west bank of the Roer, held at the Jülich Sportzplatz, an old swimming pool complex, and the Hasenfeld Gut. They are not back in the action yet, but they are close enough to it that Castiel feels the threat of the next offensive in his gut.

Every hour or so, the air echoes with German anti-aircraft guns, with artillery falling shy of their position along the Aachen-Jülich MSR, with the distant crack of gunfire and the hiss of tracers overhead. Last night, just after twenty-hundred-hours, Major Singer accompanied seven riflemen from Dog went on a reconnaissance patrol north to gather intelligence; five riflemen came back, plus Singer with a hole in his spine. He was evacuated from the Battalion aid station to a hospital rear of the line, and Castiel heard a rumour from Easy Company that he's on his way back to England and will probably never walk again.

Castiel traces a slow and meandering path through town, cigarette smouldering low between his lips. His men are billeted in what few buildings remain standing, and take this time in the early evening for themselves; mail has come up from the rear of the line, and there is a field kitchen set up serving lukewarm stew, and so they are distributed amongst the rubble and the concrete, some eating, some propped up against their haversacks while they nap, some arguing as they clean their rifles, some taking the opportunity to shave and brush their teeth. There is a game of Blackjack unfolding in three-platoon, but as Castiel understands from the shouting, some of the deck has been misplaced over the last offensive.

He speaks briefly to Lieutenant Shurley, and he directs a lost replacement from Charlie Company to their own CP, and he is just smoking his cigarette down near to the stub when he spots Dean.

Further down the road towards two-platoon, Dean is stood on the sidewalk with a piece of paper held tightly in two hands. He is completely engrossed as Castiel approaches, and when Castiel greets him with a amenable, “Evening, Winchester,” he jerks in surprise. Castiel raises his eyebrows. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah.” Dean glances at him, still seeming spooked, and then down at the paper in his hands. “Got mail,” he says evasively.

Castiel nods. “Are Sam and Jessica well?”

“No, it's – uh. From my dad.” Dean lowers the letter, and once his hand has fallen to his side, he crumples the paper discreetly in his fist. “Doesn't matter.”

“Oh.” Castiel studies his profile: the neat slant of his nose, the distracted flicker of his eyelashes, the way his lips press tight together to keep his mouth from turning down at the corners. He knows something of Dean's relationship with his father, but it's not his place to push. Instead, he asks delicately, “How is your father?”

Dean lets out a long breath. He rubs a hand over his back of his neck, the motion tilting the front of his helmet slightly over his eyes. “Doesn't matter,” he says again.

“Forgive me if I don't believe that,” Castiel says.

Dean mutters something inflammatory under his breath, and then rubs a hand down over his face. “I don't wanna talk about it,” he says bluntly, and he shoves the balled-up letter into the pocket of his combat jacket.

“Alright.” Castiel angles his head down the street. “Then can I interest you in a brisk walk and good company?”

For a moment, Dean eyes Castiel, and it looks as though he is going to refuse. His shoulders are high and tight, his expression wary. However, just as Castiel is about to excuse himself and say that he'll see him later, Dean exhales, long and slow, some of the tension seeping from his shoulders, and he says, “Why – who's joining us?”

Castiel rolls his eyes, but he sets off down the road, and Dean slowly follows. They fall into step, and it's not exactly brisk – more like aimlessly wandering – but Dean is there, with him, and that is enough. Castiel senses the heaviness of the hush between them, and so he starts talking. He tells Dean about his growing concern about the infrequency of resupplies, about how one of his new rank pins fell out last night and he nearly lost it, about the blister on the heel of his left foot. He tells him that Hester is pursuing the candidacy for the greatest irritant in the 29th Infantry with vigour, and asks whether Dean has heard about the wager between Bradbury and Harvelle on whether or not Harvelle could survive a whole week on nothing but chocolate bars and water, which gets Dean talking for the first time, as he admits that he had a role in instigating it. Castiel wishes he could be surprised.

They navigate the narrow alleys past the end of four-platoon, looping slowly down towards Able's sentry-point, while the sky darkens through indigo and night settles coldly around them. Castiel clenches and unclenches his fists to keep some warmth in his fingertips, and they are moving away from Able's harbour area, back towards Baker, when Dean says into the silence, “That was the longest he'd ever been gone, you know.”

Castiel glances over, but doesn't respond.

Dean is quiet for a long moment, subtly fidgeting. His fingers scratch and pluck at the short hair at the nape of his neck. “I thought maybe he was--” He cuts himself off and drops his gaze.

“That he was what?” Castiel asks, although he thinks he already knows what Dean is getting at.

“I don't know.” Dean jerks his shoulders loosely, the shrug a little wild and out-of-control for the nonchalance he is trying to convey. “I don't know. I just started thinking – if anything had happened to him...”

Castiel thinks of Dean, forever worrying about his baby brother, some four-thousand miles away. He touches a hand to Dean's elbow. “It's understandable,” he says, his voice quiet and reassuring. “With Sam so far, and--”

Dean looks over at him blankly. “Sam?” he repeats, as though he doesn't understand – and then he lets out a humourless laugh. “Sam – fuck, Sam would have been just fine. I just – I don't--”

They have stopped walking. Now they stand at the mouth of an alley just beyond an abandoned German pillbox, dust rising from the narrow slit-windows when the wind stirs. In the near-distance, voices can be heard from Able, Lieutenant Naomi speaking to another officer, men bickering over something insignificant, and here Dean stands, not quite looking at Castiel, and trying to breathe.

“It's complicated with us,” Dean says, at last, and he takes his hand from the back of his neck, pushes his fingers against his forehead. He breathes slow and calm. “He says some shit sometimes, I know he does. And I know he doesn't always do the best job at – but he tries, you know, he really tries, and... And everything I have – everything I am, I got from him.”

Castiel doesn't say anything. He gets the sense that he is not the one Dean is trying to convince.

For a moment, Dean is quiet. His eyes are fixed, unblinking, on a point somewhere just in front of his own boots, and he swallows once, then again. He beats his knuckles distractedly against his thigh. His mouth twists. “Did you know that when I joined up, it was the first time I'd ever been away from home?” he asks.

Castiel says mildly, “I didn't know that.”

“Yeah. First time I'd been out of Kansas.” He gives a short laugh. “Hell – first time I'd been more than ten miles out of Douglas County.”

Castiel knows the feeling. Inias once had a girlfriend in Richmond – a four-hour journey on two rickety buses – and it seemed to Castiel at the time that he may as well having been going steady with someone on the moon. He has the war to thank for expanding his horizons, at least.

“I've never been without my dad,” Dean says. He looks over at Castiel. “Before this, I was always – working in the garage with him, I was helping him take care of Sammy after my mom died. I was doing his bills and his papers and making his calls for him and--” He takes a deep breath. “It's been two years since I saw him and I'm not who I was when I left. And I think a lot of that is down to... to not having to worry about what he thinks. If I'm being an idiot. If I'm making a fool of myself. If I'm being a pain in the ass, or a sissy – I didn't have to – I could just--”

Dean can't get the words out, and Castiel thinks of Dean as he first encountered him – brash, loud, incapable of shutting the fuck up – and he thinks, for the first time, of someone realising for the first time that they have a voice of their own.

“I thought maybe he was dead,” Dean bursts out, the words finally forming concretely. “I thought maybe – and then I couldn't stop thinking about it. And then he wasn't. He's fine. And Jesus, I'm so fucking relieved, I am, but just for a second, I thought--” He scrubs a hand down over his face, and he gestures loosely with one hand as though he thinks he is still holding the letter. His fingers close around air. “It doesn't matter. It's fine.” The words punch out of him with uncharacteristic vehemence. “I'm still wasting my time. I'm still dumb as dirt. It's – whatever.”

“Dean,” Castiel says, and he steps in closer. “You're not dumb.”

“Look, it's fine.” Dean shrugs, and he starts fidgeting. His weight shifts from one foot to the other, and at his side, his fingers jitter back and forth. “It's fine.”

Castiel knows that Dean doesn't believe him. He wants to offer him comfort, but he doesn't know how. He isn't good with words, but he knows Dean. They have always had a kind of no-man's-land between them, a disconnect created by their inability to express what they feel, but it has always been bridged by touch.

They are far enough from their billets now that Castiel can get away with this: he settles a gentle hand on Dean's jaw.

It's almost heartbreaking, the way that Dean flinches first, the way that it takes him a moment to relax into the contact. It seems inexcusable to Castiel, that Dean is the gentlest person he has ever met and is yet unused to gentleness. Castiel doesn't know how to tell him that it's alright and that he is a better man that his father have dreamed, so instead his thumb brushes the curve of Dean's cheek, his fingers curling beneath Dean's ear, and he hopes he knows.

Then something pained and awful splinters across Dean's face, and he says, “Cas – don't.”

Castiel's hand becomes still. “Don't what?”

Dean tilts away from the contact. He twists his head out of reach in a small, subtle twitch, as though moving out of the path of a buzzing fly, and the set of his shoulders pulls up tense again. “Just... don't.

Jesus. You're making this worse.”

Slowly, Castiel drops his hand back to his side. “I'm sorry,” he says, and he can hear that he doesn't sorry. There is something in his tone that he didn't mean to convey, a resentment simmering under the surface. He wishes he could take it back.

Dean's head snaps back over to look at him, eyebrows pulling down into a frown. “What?”

Castiel doesn't want to do this now. Dean has his own problems to worry about, and the last thing Castiel wants to do is upset him further, but he has already peeled back the defensive layer of his pretence that everything is fine and has exposed something sour underneath. He swallows, and says, “Nothing,” and can tell instantly that he is worsening things.

The look that Dean gives him then is withering. “Don't fucking do that,” he says.

“Do what?”

“This bullshit – you're obviously pissed at me, so what is it?”

Castiel doesn't want to do this, but he dismisses it now, it will carve something irreparable between them in the distance that Dean has already created. He is careful to keep his voice soft, and he says, “How can you accuse me of being angry with you when you're the one who won't talk to me?”

Dean blinks. “What are you talking about?”

“You're angry at me,” Castiel says, and he knows, distantly, what he is doing – that he is turning this around on Dean, so that he doesn't have to deal with the heart of the issue himself. Inias hated it, told him he was a fucking coward in their harsher fights, but Castiel doesn't know how not to be, and the truth is that Dean has been pulling away for him for a while. Anxiety curls serpentine and cold through his stomach, and he can't look at Dean, but the words are spilling out of him uncontrolled. “You have been for some time, but I don't know what I did. I don't know how to make amends because I don't--”

Dean rocks back on his heels, scrubs a hand down over his face. “Fuck. You didn't *do* anything, okay--”

Castiel's stomach tightens sickeningly. “Then I should have done more,” he says, and he can feel that there is desperation creeping into his voice, and he sees now that this is everything he is afraid of – because it's one thing to push Dean away, but it is something else entirely to give himself over to Dean completely and then realise that Dean doesn't want him anymore. “What – is there something you want from me? Because if you tell me what's wrong, if you tell me what you need, then I can give you that, but I--”

“Cas, fucking stop.”

“--don't know what it is you want, and you won't talk to me, and half the time you won't even look at me, and then sometimes everything will be normal and I don't know what to--”

“Normal?”

Dean's voice is loud, sharp. It cuts through Castiel's rambling and stops him dead. He looks at Dean and sees him somewhere between

incredulity and anger.

“Cas,” he says. “We are never going to be normal.”

And suddenly, Castiel understands.

For a moment, he is voiceless. He looks at Dean, and he takes in the tightening of his jaw, the hard set of his mouth, the tension in his shoulders. All that he sees is someone who is afraid, and it breaks his fucking heart. He knows that Dean is waiting for him to argue back. If Castiel retorts, then Dean has something to bounce off, to ricochet back louder and angrier; Castiel doesn't say anything. He waits.

The silence stretches longer and longer, until Castiel starts to fear that he has misjudged this, and that Dean will only pull away, but then, at last, he speaks. His voice is rough, and he starts with, “They just keep talking about '*after*' like it's something we get to have.”

Castiel lowers his eyes.

“And I can't stop thinking about it,” Dean goes on. “And Joe's got his bar, and Ed's got his girl, and Charlie wants to go back to school, and my dad's writing me saying have I thought about what I'm gonna do when this is over – because according to him, the whole thing is more or less over anyway, now, and I'm not doing much useful, so why don't I just come home?” Dean is talking faster and faster, the words tripping over each other in his haste and his anger. “Why don't I just go back to his stupid fucking garage and fix cars with him for the rest of my fucking life – while Sammy gets to break away from it, and Sammy gets to go follow his dreams on the far side of the fucking country, and Sammy gets to be with the person he wants – and nobody ever asked me what *I* want. And you know what? Being a medic fucking sucks, but at least I chose it.” He steps in close to Castiel, then, as though Castiel is the one trying to snatch it all from

him, and he drums a fingertip against his own chest. “I chose this. This is mine, and what I have here is mine. The people I met here, and the people I saved here, and the work I've done, that's mine. And *you*--”

Castiel's throat is tight.

“I chose you,” Dean says, and his voice cracks. “See, I don't give a shit what I do when this is over, as long as you're in it.”

Castiel looks at Dean, and it feels like there is shrapnel, hot and twisted, in his gut. “Dean, I – there's no room for me there.”

Dean laughs. “Yeah,” he says, and he shakes his head, and the shape of his smile is hollow. “Yeah – no fucking shit, Cas. You think I don't know that?”

“Dean, we can't--” Castiel can't find the words for how ludicrous it is for Dean to even be entertaining this idea – that they both make it through this, and they find their way back to each other across the hundreds and hundreds of miles between their homes, and they wake up one morning in a world that doesn't hate them for their perversions. Castiel turns his back on him, walks deeper into the alley, painfully conscious of their proximity to both Able and Baker's harbour areas. “I'm not going home with you. We're not actually sweethearts.”

Dean follows. “Why the hell not?”

“We--” Hysterically, Castiel feels the urge to laugh. “We're not going to get married, Dean, we--”

Dean places a hand on Castiel's shoulder, turns him around, and he takes a step closer, into his personal space. The expression on his face is a challenge. “I've had plenty sweethearts I never married – and I've been further with you than any of them.”

“Geographically, yes, but--”

“Very funny,” Dean interrupts. “I'm serious. So what – you're telling me you haven't even thought about it?”

Castiel's mouth is coming up dry. He says, “No.”

Dean's mouth quirks at the corner, a bitter half-smile that doesn't reach his eyes. “Bullshit.”

Castiel takes a deep breath, steadying. “I have tried hard not to,” he confesses, and his voice is low. He hears shame in his own words, and he can't meet Dean's eyes. “I know how this works – I know the shelf-life of commanding officers. You're a medic, Dean. You have a reasonably fair chance of making it out in one piece, getting to go home. I have no such illusions about my chances.” He can feel a lump thickening in his throat. “I can't afford the luxury of imagining what my life might be like afterwards.”

“But if you could--” Dean starts, and Castiel backs away from him, one step, then another.

“Dean,” he says. “I don't have the right to ask anything of you.” It twists sickening in Castiel's gut even as he speaks, thinking that Dean hasn't realised yet that the way out, the way back from the mess they've created here is, for him, still so easy. “Not when you can still choose to go back and – and marry some nice girl, to have kids, make your father proud--”

“I don't give a fuck what my dad wants,” Dean interrupts, his voice rising. “And fuck normal, Cas, I don't fucking want *normal*--”

“Why not?” Castiel bursts out, irrationally angry now, that Dean doesn't appreciate how lucky he is and doesn't seem to care. “I would give anything--”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Dean says, and Castiel waits for him to go on, but he doesn't. He just goes on staring at Castiel until it starts to get uncomfortable, and Castiel realises that Dean is waiting for him. An answer, maybe. Castiel doesn't know. He doesn't know why Dean is looking at him like that – why it feels as though, once again, Dean is the one with the upper hand, the one with all the answers and he's waiting for Castiel to figure it out. At last, Dean lets out a short, humourless laugh. “Jesus. You really have no idea.”

Castiel says, “What?”

Dean steps up into Castiel's space again, and it feels predatory. Castiel swallows. “After all this,” Dean says, “you think I stuck around because – what? Because I think you're a good dicksuck?”

Slowly, it dawns on Castiel what is happening. He can't breathe. He doesn't want this.

Dean swallows. “Christ, Cas, I--”

“Don't,” Castiel bursts out, and he takes another step back out of blind panic. His back hits the wall of the alley. “Whatever you're going to – don't you dare.”

Dean follows. He moves forwards until there are mere inches between them, and he stands over Castiel, tall and imposing and impossibly gentle. His hand settles, steady, soft, on Castiel's elbow. He angles his head down towards him and says, “Castiel, I'm gone on you. You get that, right?”

Castiel's throat closes off. “Please,” he manages hoarsely. “Don't say that to me.”

Dean's hand is still on Castiel's elbow, the warmth of his skin tangible even through Castiel's jacket, and he stares at him. Overhead, the twilight is darkening so that Dean is losing shape, slowly reduced to the line of his nose, the curve of his mouth, the shift of the eyelashes, as he is caught in the lamplight from the street. In spite of it, Castiel can see his throat work, the way that he is nervous and open and pleading, and they are in such close proximity that it's instinctual: Castiel looks at his lips.

He looks away, because Jesus, he can't be thinking about kissing Dean right now, but before he can turn his head, Dean lifts a hand to Castiel's face, fitting his palm to the line of his jaw, and he kisses him.

Instantly, Castiel has his hands fisted into the front of Dean's jacket, and he hauls Dean forwards against him. He opens his mouth, and they are breathing the same air, shaky, and they kiss again. Castiel's heart is in his throat and his head is spinning, and all that he can think is that he loves Dean, he loves him, and, against Dean's mouth, he says, “I imagine you. When I--”

Dean pulls back far enough to look at him, and Castiel can't finish the sentence.

“So,” Dean says, finally, and his voice is smaller than Castiel has ever heard it. “You're with me on this?”

“Fuck, Dean.” Castiel closes his eyes. “Of course I'm with you, I just – I need to be realistic.”

“Is it really so fucking crazy?”

“Yes,” Castiel says. “And truthfully, I think I would rather never see you again than get my hopes up and have something go wrong.”

“Then say the word and I'm out of here, Cas, because me, I'd rather have you.”

Castiel opens his eyes and looks at him.

Dean doesn't let up an inch of the space between them, one hand on Castiel's arm, the other cradling his face. He is steady, and he leans on Castiel as much as Castiel leans on him, and he says, “I'd rather take whatever we can get.”

In what dim light is afforded, he can see Dean's tentative half-smile, the relaxed set of his brow, and he can feel himself soften and melt. It impossible to do anything but yield under Dean's near unwavering optimism, and he can feel a tiny smile pull at the corners of his mouth, because this has been the truth of it all along: Dean is irresistible.

30th November, 1944

The church has been stripped, hollowed like a spent shell. The pews have been hauled out to form some barricade somewhere, long jagged marks carved into the flagstone underneath by their dragging feet; there are Stations of the Cross missing, so that Jesus somehow makes it to the crucifixion without help, without stumbling. There is a handful of empty crates by one wall, *20cm leichter Ladungswerfer* printed lopsidedly on their sides, and one solitary pew left behind, broken at one end and rocking beneath Castiel's weight every time he shifts in his seat. He has his rifle propped between his knees, muzzle pointing towards the high arches of the church ceiling. Loaded. He didn't think to unload it before he came in, as he should, and he feels that to do so now, as a half-forgotten after-thought, would be to draw God's attention to it.

Castiel thinks, now, of confession. He wonders what he would say – if he should start with the men whose deaths he has allowed or encouraged or actively caused, or if he should start with Dean Winchester's cock in his mouth. Dean's hands on his hips. He's fairly certain that it's beside the point of confession to admit to something you plan to do again and again.

Truthfully, he isn't sure why he's there at all. For weeks now, his crucifix has been nothing but a lead weight at the bottom of one of his webbing pouches, tangled around his can opener. He hasn't prayed since before they left France, and he doesn't think he'll start again now.

He sits with his feet either side of his rifle butt, watching arcs of pale light in dove-grey and pink spill in from the broken windows. He sits, and he considers how remarkable it is that this church is even still standing, when Bourheim has been the site of so much violence already, and then there are footsteps on the flagstones behind him, slow and light – not Winchester. Before Castiel can turn to see who it is, the person is upon him, and Gabriel Laufeyson comes sidling into the pew without genuflection, and he drops down beside Castiel.

“Evening,” he says conversationally, removing his helmet. He sets it down on the pew on his far side, and then props his legs out in front

of him in a lazy stretch, shifting his rifle to lay across his lap.

“Evening, sir,” Castiel says.

Gabriel scoffs. “Oh, fuck off,” he says, with a dismissive flap of his hand. “I've outranked you for months – don't start that shit with me now.”

Castiel tilts his head over to one side, contemplative. It's been less than twenty-four hours since Gabriel was moved up to Battalion S-1 in the aftermath of Major Singer's evacuation; he's still getting used to the idea. “True,” he says. “But you can discipline me now.”

“You wish, kid.”

The hush that falls between them is not quite comfortable. They're friends, of a kind, but they don't know each other very well. For the first time in months, Castiel is conscious of his old awkwardness, his uncertainty as to what he should say to keep a conversation going. “This is a nice church,” he says, at last, when the silence has stretched too thin.

Gabriel huffs. “Is it?” he asks. He raises his eyebrows. “At this point, all I see are places to take cover.”

Ruefully, Castiel half-smiles. “Good defilade from that transept.”

“Forget the transept. I want to occupy the goddamn spire.” Gabriel glances over. “You religious?”

Castiel doesn't know how to answer. After a moment that stretches on too long, he says, “Theoretically.”

Gabriel tuts, but doesn't comment on Castiel's lack of a real answer. From a long-ago memory, Castiel recalls seeing Gabriel at Mass in Fort Blanding; now, he eyes Gabriel as he yawns and irreverently kicks a chunk of rubble to skitter over the flagstones.

After a moment, Gabriel clears his throat. “So. Am I intruding on your moment of artful introspection if I say I've got orders for you?”

Castiel looks over. “No. What is it?”

“Briefing at seventeen-hundred hours, Battalion CP. We're moving out for Hasenfeld Gut tomorrow morning, but Major Campbell will have more on that later,” Gabriel says. “Also, there's some whisperings about transfers...?” His voice trails off into a half-question, his face scrunching into an expression halfway between bewilderment and apathy.

“I heard something about that,” Castiel says, wary.

Gabriel blows out air. “Yeah, I gotta be honest, I don't know what's happening – there's so much caught up with Major Singer that I'm trying to unpick – but as soon as I know a little more, I'll give you a shout.”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah.” Gabriel is quiet for a moment, but this time it is different – it feels like the world is holding its breath. Gabriel's chin is tipped up to

the ceiling, his body language closed and still. After a long minute, he says, “We gave 'em some shit, Novak, but you know, it's no better up here.”

Castiel looks at him. He doesn't want to hear that everyone is struggling, all the way up the echelons until the ladder ends. He says, “Yes, sir,” his voice carefully straddling a thin line between dead-pan amusement and candour.

Gabriel takes the humorous side; he laughs. “Alright,” he says, and he stands up, dusts off the pants of his combats. “I got places to be. You put in a good word with the man upstairs for me.” He shrugs into his rifle sling. “Or tell him to go fuck himself. You know – whichever. I'm easy.”

If Castiel isn't going to pray for himself, he thinks he definitely isn't going to pray for Gabriel, but he doesn't think he's ready for that blasphemy either. He doesn't know how to respond, and so he doesn't say anything, and he watches as Gabriel slaps his helmet back onto his head and gives off a jaunty two-finger salute.

“See you later, Castiel,” he says, and then he is gone.

Castiel says, “See you,” into the absence and the quiet.

He thinks about praying, then. He runs through the Lord's Prayer in his head, not in sincerity, but as though checking that he remembers the words, and around him, the church is still, the air thick and heavy. The sound of combat in the miles leading up to Jülich can still be heard through the broken windows, but for a moment, Castiel can pretend he doesn't hear it. Without the stained glass in shards on the flagstones, casting lethargic rainbows across his boots, and the rickety pew half-shattered beneath him, he can pretend that this is the world without war.

Castiel pulls a slip of crumpled paper from his combat jacket and smoothes it as best as he can against the knee of his combat pants. It isn't entirely effective, and does leave the back of the paper distinctly muddy, but it's good enough for him, and so he retrieves his pencil, and he starts to write.

Dear Hannah,

Please disregard my last letter to you. I know that I expressed that I would prefer to keep my mother's house, but I am not sure this is what I want anymore. I will continue to send you my wages to help pay for the maintenance of it in my absence, but I think that once the war is over, moving might be in my best interest after all. It is such a large house, and I have no need for extravagance, regardless of any sentimentalities I may have about it.

He pauses, his pencil hovering over the page. He stares at his narrow, spidering letters until the lines blur out of focus.

In his mind, Castiel can see his mother's house – freshly painted in blue and cream, which means she is still alive in this memory; the kitchen counter overflowing with jellies and tarts for an occasion for which he would have had to mop the floor and wear nice clothes. He did love her, dutifully, in the detached kind of way that he thinks one might love an old tree in the back yard that has been there as long as they can remember. Castiel went back for her funeral, in 1936, tidy neighbourly grief rolling over the carpets and floorboards like a settling smoke, and he hasn't returned since.

He bounces the nib of his pencil distractedly against his thigh. He itches for a cigarette, but he's not so far gone as to light up in a church.

Castiel sets his pencil back to paper.

Please continue to maintain the house, so that I might sort out my affairs when I return to Bedford, but if you could keep an eye out for potential buyers when all this is over, then I would be extremely grateful. It would be nice to be somewhat closer to Bismarck, so that we might see more of one another. I think I might relocate out West.

2nd December, 1944

The time comes to move out again, and Castiel is moving hurriedly between platoons to supervise the organisation of his men when an unfamiliar Staff Sergeant emblazoned with the Blue and Grey comes jogging up and falls into step with him.

“Excuse me,” the sergeant says, and he is rifling through a great number of sheafs of paper tacked together on a clipboard too small for it. “You're with the 116th, is that correct?”

Castiel spares him a glance, already flicking his through his own paperwork as he walks. “That's correct.”

“If I could just grab you for a moment, then, I need to ask you--”

Castiel shakes back his sleeve from his wrist to check the time – oh-five-twelve hours. He has just under fifteen minutes to finalise the preparation of every aspect of Baker, from ammunition to equipment to casualties to rations, and if they are anything less than absolutely battle-efficient, then he knows who will be the one getting chewed out by Battalion. “Is there any way I could perhaps speak with you later, sergeant? It's just that--”

“Sir, I'm a runner from Division,” the sergeant says tentatively, as though he's somewhat reluctant to use his own trump card. “If that helps.”

Castiel stops walking. He looks at the sergeant, not without suspicion, and then his eyes dart away behind him, where he can see Battalion staff runners weaving between the swarm of soldierly chaos. He looks back to the sergeant. “How can I assist?”

“This'll only take a moment, I promise.” The sergeant begins rummaging through his papers again, and then takes significantly longer than a moment to produce a pen from one of his combat jacket's pockets. “So – you're with the 116th, and you are...?”

“Captain Novak. Nan Oboe Victor Able King,” Castiel reels off. “Baker Company Commanding, 2nd Battalion.”

“Thank you. And you're not overdue for any replacements, are you?”

Castiel hesitates. “Overdue for a few,” he says carefully. He is down anywhere between sixteen and thirty-four men, depending on how optimistic he is being.

The sergeant's eyes flash up to meet him over the top of the clipboard. “Oh? How many are you waiting to be resupplied with?”

Castiel says, “Sixteen.” He glances away towards the noise and the bustle of the 2nd Battalion packing and redistributing and jostling for space, and he knows that he can't dismiss a runner from Battalion, but he itches in his boots to be gone. He shifts impatiently, and he runs through in his head what needs doing – getting platoon sergeants to clear through the abandoned harbour areas; double-checking that all his men have been resupplied with at the least the bare minimum in

the way of food, smokes, and ammunition; establishing patrol with the other company COs; reporting back to Batalion.

“How many of those missing are technicians?”

“Approximately eight or nine,” Castiel says.

“Approximately?”

“I have the details in my haversack but I left that at company CP – if you want, I can retrieve it, but I'll have to report back to later as I have to--”

“No, it's fine, eight or nine will do.” The staff sergeant frowns as he writes. “Eight or nine technicians down – and are those engineers, medics...?”

“Engineers, mostly. I could do with more translators, if that's what this is about.”

The sergeant breathes a half-laugh. “We could all do with more translators, captain. And who is your best combat medic?”

“Dean Winchester, Technician Fourth Grade.” Dean is the senior medic, and not purely in rank – from day one, he has consistently been the fastest, the most efficient medic they have, the most skilled with the scissors and sulfa powder, the most gentle and calming when a man goes down and is jerking and bleeding and crying for home. Castiel remembers that he needs to also find Dean and the other medics and ensure that they have enough of their medical equipment before they move out – they should already have been resupplied, but

Castiel can't remember if First Sergeant Masters included it in his report, and he already handed the report into the S-1.

The officer hums to himself as he writes, clipboard wobbling. “Alright. We'll get back to you on additional technicians as soon as we have the next batch of replacements, but for now, we'll take Winchester, and then we'll organise something with you further down the line.”

Castiel lifts his head. “I'm sorry?”

“Not immediately, don't worry,” the sergeant says, without looking up from his clipboard. “You'll be fine for this operation, at the very least. I'm told you'll be notified seventy-two hours in advance, and that shouldn't be for a while yet, so you could probably expect him to be collected in a week or so.”

“Collected--” Castiel starts. “What are you--”

The sergeant lifts his eyes to meet Castiel's over the edge of his paperwork. “You were briefed on the transfers, weren't you?”

“I wasn't.”

There passes a moment between them where they stare at each other and say nothing, and then at the exact moment that the staff sergeant lowers his clipboard and starts up with, *your S-1 should have*-- Castiel cuts over him.

“Forgive me,” he says hastily. “We're currently experiencing a reorganisation of our Battalion staff – our S-1 was hit a few days ago, and had to be evacuated to England for treatment, and as such we

don't have entirely effective lines of communication established yet between--”

“Am I to take this to mean that the rest of your Battalion's CCOs will be similarly uninformed?” the sergeant interrupts, exhaustion sinking into his shoulders.

“Yes, sergeant,” Castiel says. Something is coiling tight around his ribs. Squeezing.

“Christ.” He starts rifling through his papers again. “Well, regardless of whether you were briefed, the orders are being enacted through the V Corps – look, I have intel here saying that most of your medical staff were transfers anyway. From the 104th.”

Castiel's voice struggles in his throat. “Yes – that's true, but--”

“It's unfortunate, but enormous losses are being sustained along the Hürtgen front and in Kleinau, and we need more men. We lost an entire aid station last week--”

“So now you want my men to get blown up instead,” Castiel cuts across him. As though from a great distance, he is aware that he can't do this, that he needs to stand back and nod and say, *yes, sergeant, that's fine, sergeant,* but it isn't happening. He can feel the tightness in his chest begin to splinter, leaving sharp edges, and something is about to burst through the cracks.

“Captain--”

“It doesn't matter,” Castiel says sharply. “I can't spare him. He's my

senior combat medic, he's integral to company cohesion, and he's extremely well-liked – the loss to morale would be staggering, not to mention—”

“I'm sorry, Captain Novak, but I'm afraid this is non-negotiable,” the sergeant says.

“I'm negotiating.”

“That's not how this--”

Castiel's breath is coming shaky, and he swallows, and he keeps his voice steady, and he says, “Take someone else.”

The sergeant's eyebrows arch. “Sir?”

This is immeasurably unprofessional, and Castiel doesn't care. “I can spare a medic, but not him.”

The sergeant balks. “Captain, I can't select based on blind favouritism--”

“It's not favouritism,” Castiel lies. “You asked for the best, and he is the best, but he's the best for a reason, and we need him.”

Slowly, the sergeant's expression shifts through polite interest to something now which has turned hostile. “Look. This is beyond your jurisdiction. My orders come from General Gerhardt himself, and they have the approval of your Battalion, so this should not be a problem,”

he says, voice tight. “I apologise for any inconvenience these orders cause you personally, but it is out of your control. You'll be given at least seventy-two hours' notice in order to prepare your transfers and to reorganise your company to accommodate, which is more than generous. Now, do I need to report this obstruction of orders to your Battalion commander, or have we come to an agreement?”

Castiel's jaw tightens. “No, sergeant.”

The sergeant gives a short, peremptory nod. “Thank you,” he says, with thinly veiled disdain. “Seventy-two hours' notice. We'll be in touch.”

“Yes, sergeant.”

A moment passes in which the officer only eyes Castiel, suspicion still evident in the set of his brow. Then at last, he snaps the lid back onto his pen, and he turns away. He leaves in his wake a stunned silence like the impact of a shell strike.

For several moments, Castiel stands frozen, and the world moves around him. Up ahead, Baker are running themselves ragged in preparation – less than six minutes now until they have to be formed up on parade, completely ready to move. First Sergeant Masters is yelling him hoarse chasing after stragglers. Milligan heaves haversacks out into the street and calls out names inked onto strips of peeling green tape; Virgil flips back and forth between two seemingly identical pieces of paper as he checks and double-checks. And Castiel stands there, and he doesn't know what to do.

He takes his helmet off. He scrapes a hand roughly backwards through his hair, and he whispers, “Shit – *shit.*” Castiel swallows hard around the shape of panic in his throat, and he exhales, slow and shivering. He rubs a hand over his jaw, replaces his helmet, and he heads back

into the foray. Nothing else they can do but move.

Chapter 17: Gut Hasenfeld

2nd December, 1944

Dear Sam,

Your plans for Christmas sound dynamite– I'm just sorry I can't be there. I had an idea of what I was gonna get you as well... I guess I was pretty optimistic when we first got out here, thinking I'd be back in time. Well, I won't tell you my idea, then when I get back I'll buy it for you. Shit – and I gotta buy for Jessica too, now. Still can't believe it. Part of the goddamn family and I've never even met the gal. What are you thinking of getting her? Gotta go for something romantic now, Sammy. You gotta keep your girl happy, you know what I mean. I think going back up to Colorado to see her parents is a good idea, too. Not that it's impossible to have a good holiday with dad, but... Besides, there's no guarantee he's even gonna be there when it rolls around.

Yeah, he did send me a letter. I'm not surprised he wouldn't tell you what was in it – you would have flipped your wig. I don't much wanna talk about it. A lot of the same old shit, you know. You can probably imagine. Don't sweat it, though. I'm not mad, so don't you go getting heated on my behalf. He's just – he's an idiot. Forget him. And come on, are you kidding me? Of course I told all the guys about you and Jess. Hell, I don't think I could've kept it from them if I tried – truth be told I got a little embarrassing. Novak heard and he was happy for you, too. I think when he saw all these guys crowding me and saying I'd got some message from you, he figured it'd be bad business, came over worried as well. And then as soon as I actually explained, he just – I dunno. It's hard to explain. He was excited, though. Like he lit up a little. He's real happy for you. We all are.

Things over here are going fine. The weather is crummy as hell... non-stop rain and mud for what feels like weeks and we're all getting sick of it. We're gonna be swimming to Berlin by the end of this, you wait and see. We're moving out again today, getting back into it. Gotta be honest, I think we're overdue a rest at this point. I think we deserve it. I can definitely think of a couple guys who could do with sleeping for a week. Cas at the

top of that list. He's doing a lot better, I'm proud of him, if that's not nuts to say. We're on the same page a lot more these days and that's no small achievement either. Even seen him smiling a couple times recently so I guess that Lord-works-in-mysterious-ways schtick isn't too far off the mark. Now all we need is to get out of the mud and hold ourselves together a little longer. The guys are getting tired. A couple of them have been – they're just tired. We're fine, though. We'll make it. One day at a time, huh?

Anyway. I'll write soon. You say hi to Jessica for me, remind her she's too good for you. Take care of yourself. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

2nd December, 1944

There isn't time to think about it. Baker Company pick up their bags and their gear, and they move on the Roer's west bank, where there are three sturdy German strongholds sitting in the Ninth Army's way, spraying mortars and machine-gun fire, and in the distance, Jülich, dark and menacing, railway guns firing with catastrophic precision. The 116th have intelligence on movements of the Panzerbrigade, on a handful of Howitzers and 88s, plus a minefield spanning the width of the MSR. Losing Dean, by comparison, is insignificant – or it should be.

Castiel squares his shoulders against the sensation that he has had the earth sharply yanked out from beneath his feet – like that weightless split-second when a shell strikes close by and jars his knees out from underneath him. He moves up with two-platoon to drive forwards towards Gut Hasenfeld, a collection of occupied farm buildings, set back behind a tough stone wall, just short of the river.

The issue here is much the same as it was at Koslar: an open expanse of fields all around the German position, flat at a sheet of cardboard, with no cover in sight. Over towards the Sportplatz, which Dog, Fox, and Easy have been tasked with taking, they at least have a clump of half-frozen woodland towards the south from which they can stage their attack; Gut Hasenfeld has nothing.

He crouches with his platoon-leaders a half-mile or so back, directing their plan of assault. “Alistair, you stay back here with four-platoon. I want smoke as a cross-section to that first line of buildings – seen? You block their vision, and I want mortars right on their heads – go for the windows, the rooftops, keep their heads down. Once the smoke is set, one- and two-platoon move up – extended line and mind your spacings. Take alternating bounds, as big a leap as you can manage before they start firing.” Castiel sweeps his hand across, left to right. “Shurley, you take them from the corner – Virgil, move from the far right of our sector, as close as you can get to Able without pissing anybody off. I don't want anybody moving up the centre of our axis – that's where we're most visible and Hester, that's where you're going to be laying down a base of fire from three-hundred yards.” He lifts his head, glances between them. “Understood?”

“Understood.”

“Ammo conservation?” Alistair asks.

“Minimal.” Castiel snaps away his binoculars and tucks them back into his combat jacket. “The whole Battalion's just been resupplied, we can afford to lay down heavy fire on them.” He adjusts the chin-strap of his helmet, shrugs into his rifle string. He turns his head and calls forwards Concino to radio in to Naomi and Cain, to synchronise their assault, and then it's time to go.

They move. Four-platoon set up their mortar stands and tripods at the

rear of the assault, Castiel's rifle platoons moving up, and then one- and two-platoon take off running, split in the middle to approach the buildings from the corner, and then Hester yells, *base of farm buildings, suppressive fire,* and the call is echoed throughout three-platoon, and the mortars start coming down.

From three-platoon, Castiel watches, his heart in his throat. Three-platoon spreads a thin base of fire at the foot at the farm buildings, and he can see Virgil move the length of his steadily advancing extended line, ordering arcs of fire. Ahead of them, four-platoon's mortars crash down heavy and fast, punching up columns of mud and rubble, and towards the twisting black smoke, Baker goes running.

However, what concerns Castiel is this: the German position isn't firing.

His eyes track across the expanse of frost-encrusted field that they have left to cross – they are close enough now that the enemy would be able to take a number of them out even with poor visuals, so why not-- and then he realises.

“Concino,” he yells, twisting to reach for him. “Get Virgil and Shurley on the--”

Halfway along one-platoon, there is an explosion. Castiel turns to look back to his advancing platoons as Private Ziskie is crashing onto his back with a scream, everything below the hips a dark tangle of bone – and there is another crunch beneath Ziskie as he lands, and it gets exponentially worse. The second explosion doesn't leave behind enough for any medic to be even worth visiting.

Castiel's mouth falls open, but there isn't anything he can say. He sees the carnage without taking in any of the detail – he's getting good at that, skimming over the bone and blood so that it isn't seared onto the

backs of his eyelids in the days to come – and he tries to think what to do, and then a man in two-platoon steps on a mine – and another – and then, finally, the Germans start firing.

“Fuck,” Castiel whispers, as panicked yells rise from the fields ahead, his men figuring out the Germans defence tactic.

Private Coronen loses both his legs, and Bescoby takes two rounds through the skull, and Torrence's elbow is shattered by shrapnel, and an S-mine takes Bogic's shin apart in ragged slivers, and there is Macdonald and Amriel and Chavers. There is Dean, sprinting forwards with blood-red hands, and Castiel tears his eyes away.

“Concino!” he yells, and instantly, there is his radioman with his radio mouthpiece outstretched. Castiel takes it. “Baker-one-one, this is the six – abort extended line, set your squads in single-file and follow proven route, but keep your spacings – Baker-one-one, come in, how copy--”

The radio crackles and – “Copy that, Baker-one out--”

Castiel pushes the mouthpiece at Concino. “Get Shurley on.”

He gets the message across, watches as his men shift and reorganise even as gunfire tears through them, kicks them backwards – even as the earth beneath them ignites, the minefield taking them apart.

Retrieving his binoculars from his jacket, Castiel looks out over the fields between him and Gut Hasenfeld, assessing – at least four machine-gunner positions dug into the thick stone wall that surrounds the central farm buildings; brown concrete building quarter-left of axis, five hundred yards, muzzle-flash from first storey window, and from second storey window, plus a faintly metallic glint down

between the two eastern-most buildings that could be anything from a fallen canteen to a goddamn Howitzer. Castiel breathes through his teeth.

He keeps Concino nearby to give out orders – *move up, move up, pairs fire and manoeuvre, keep pushing forwards* – and they move, rapid and aggressive, to push through the chaos and fire. Somewhere beyond Castiel's sight-line, deep in the German position, there is the dull rhythm of a mortar stand kicking back against the earth, and Castiel freeze, fingers tightening on his binoculars until his knuckles turn white.

The first mortar punches a hole in second-squad, sprays sharp dark needles of shrapnel that slice through Slater, take off Gustin's arm at the elbow, punches Lance Corporal White solidly in the chest to throw him backwards onto the ground, and then the ground explodes beneath him. The second devastates the far end of two-platoon.

“Fuck,” Castiel says. “Fuck – pull them back!” He snatches at Concino's radio and gives the order – *retreat, retreat, everybody pull back, use the proven route* – but he watches as a handful of his soldiers turn to run in blind panic and they hit mines again. They land hard on their backs, legs a raw, incomprehensible tangle, and there is Dean and Fitzgerald and du Mort, ducked low from the bullets cracking over the tops of their heads as they haul casualties up by the webbing and drag them out.

There is Battalion on line one after a status report, and Castiel pulls his men out, reorganises. He calls in to Able and Charlie to see if they had any better luck in their sector and hears nothing encouraging back; he sets down mortars from four-platoon to scorch the earth ahead of Gut Hasenfeld in the hopes of detonating the worst of the minefield, but to little effect; he takes three-platoon out of reserve and pushes them up with two-platoon again, and pulls them back less than an hour later, bleeding and broken. A scout car is called up from the rear of the line to escort the casualties they've already taken, and Castiel studies muzzle-flash flickering from the farm buildings' concrete slit windows, the neat, precise spray of machine-gun fire, and

he makes notes on a scrap of paper on positions he can identify, and he tries again.

Again and again, Baker and the rest of the 2nd Battalion press towards the German strongholds, but the mine-field is near impenetrable, and as soon as Baker stumbles upon it, the Germans open fire with concealed gunner positions and 88s to tear Castiel's men to shreds, and Castiel can hear further along the line of 116th that 1st Battalion attacking the Sportplatz are drawing fire from Jülich's railway gun, the air split by roaring thunder. He doesn't want to have to face it himself.

Baker takes one step forwards and retreat a half-mile back, Castiel desperately trying to keep his company in one piece as they are fractured and scattered and shredded.

From the safety of the rear of the line, Major Campbell calls in – *try an investment on the stronghold; have Baker and Charlie left flank, Dog and Easy right flank, while Able drives up the centre as a distraction; try a steady advance all together on its weakest points towards the south-west* – and nothing sticks. The casualty rate is obscene, and Castiel doesn't have enough men to be losing them at this rate, and nothing seems to be working.

By the time the sun is sinking low in the sky to bleed a purple evening bruise over the horizon, Castiel gets word from the S-3 ordering them to pull back as far as Koslar. Castiel is more than happy to obey.

As they form up to move, Castiel catches sight of Dean climbing into a scout car up ahead. One hand lifts a glistening bag of plasma up at shoulder-level; Castiel can see him speaking softly to the casualties being evacuated, his words incomprehensible from his distance, but his smile patient and calming. There is blood on the crest of one cheekbone.

The slow trudge back is an exercise in exhaustion – there is no laughter, no light-heartedness. Sergeant Garrigan is limping, having stoically refused need of the scout car; Turner nurses a peppered helmet in his hands and frequently reaches up to wipe away a slow trickle of blood from his hairline. Castiel glances behind them at the west bank, still flickering orange beneath the smoke as the shelling goes on from 1st Battalion. Baker gave it their all today, and were swept aside like gathering dust.

Castiel is tired. He has a headache pressing at the backs of his eyes, and a blister swelling on one heel, and a tightness in both shoulders that springs up a shooting pain in his neck if he turns his head too far. December has turned bitter and chill, and his fingers feel stiff and clumsy with cold. Castiel wants to wash off a month's worth of blood and grime, and to sleep, but neither of those are going to happen anytime soon.

They re-establish their old harbour area, setting up supply and cas-evac routes, laying down defensive arcs of fire on a one-eighty degree perimeter, with Able Company at their six o'clock. Castiel pushes open the door to the command post that he abandoned mere hours ago, and he rubs a hand down over his face.

He pauses with one foot on the front step, and he looks in at the dust and cobwebs, the broken furniture shoved haphazardly towards the back wall, the curving scars dug into the floorboards by the lazy shifting of heavy crates. He turns on his heel and he sits heavily on the step. He takes off his helmet.

The street unfolds in front of him as a long stretch of bustle and movement – whole companies marching through, runners jogging between CPs to pass on orders, supply officers hauling equipment and ammunition out of the back of trucks to pass down to waiting NCOs who call out instructions in deafening parade-ground tones. Castiel sets his helmet carefully between his two feet, and he digs into his combat jacket for his cigarette tin. The conclusion he has come to is that the world won't stop spinning if he just sits down for a minute; at this stage, he thinks that the world could stop spinning and he

wouldn't even care.

Castiel lights up, his lighter feebly sputtering as the gas runs low, and he takes a long slow drag. He exhales smoke, and through the pale blue-white twist of it, there is Dean, wandering loose-limbed and lazy through the thin light of evening.

The hazy dove-lilac glow of the sunset bleeds over his skin, shadowing his freckles, and shines dully off the top of his helmet. His hands are bloody in a dark, peeling way, as though he has already done his best to scrub the stain away, and he catches sight of Castiel when he is only a couple yards away.

There hasn't yet been opportunity to tell Dean. They have been too busy pushing up into enemy territory, getting shot at – no opportunity. This is what Castiel is telling himself. He isn't keeping the truth to himself with the childish fear lodged deep in his chest that if he says out loud, then it'll be finally real – that maybe if he keeps quiet and pretends that it isn't, then it isn't. Dean will get to stay.

“Hey, Captain,” Dean says as he approaches. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Castiel looks at him. “At company CP,” he says.

Dean nods. His mouth tilts up into a half-smile. He looks bone-tired, grubby and blood-stained, but he is still trying to smile. He comes to stand just in front of Castiel with a respectable two yards between them. “Unheard of, sir.”

Castiel regards him for a moment, taking him in. The lazy tilt of his stance, hands in pockets, his jutting elbows highlighting the curve of his legs. The way he quirks his eyebrows up under Castiel's stare. Castiel's eyes flicker to meet Dean's and away again. He stares down at

the smouldering end of his cigarette, and he thinks, *you have to tell him.* Dread tightens in his gut to the point of nausea; he takes another slow drag on his cigarette, stalling, and he doesn't answer.

“Captain?” Dean's smile dissolves. “Everything alright?”

Castiel doesn't say anything. He carefully avoids even looking at him. *You have to tell him.* Just for a moment, he considers what might happen if he didn't. If he kept this to himself and worked independently to find a way around it. There is still, perhaps, room for him to negotiate – if he threatens someone at Battalion, or maybe sending a strongly-worded letter to General Gerhardt will do it.

Dean steps in closer. “Sir--”

He has to tell him. Castiel's fingers tighten on his cigarette until it bends out of shape, the paper cracking and tobacco crumbling out from the middle. He takes a deep breath, steadying himself to speak, and the words don't come out. He is still just staring down at his cigarette until it blurs out of focus.

Dean's voice drops low, and he says, “Cas, you--”

“You're being reassigned,” Castiel says. He has no idea how his voice is going to sound until he gets the words out, and he hears it in only in retrospect – the tightly clipped consonants, the cold tone, the way that he has closed himself off. He wants to take the words back and try again, but he doesn't think he can say it a second time.

For a second, Dean is silent. He straightens up, away from Castiel. He holds himself stiffly. “What?”

“Orders for your transfer came in early this morning.”

Dean seems to struggle for a moment. Castiel won't look at him, but out of the corner of his eye, he can see Dean's mouth, open, and his throat working to respond. “Reassigned--” he starts, and then Lieutenant Shurley's voice rises somewhere behind Dean.

“Captain Novak?”

Shit – this is not what Castiel needs right now. He has scarcely time to speak to Dean as it is; if he could just go five minutes without being interrupted by some catastrophe from the rest of the company, that would be perfect. Castiel pulls his cigarette from his mouth, takes a deep breath, and he stands up to step past Dean. “Lieutenant Shurley,” he greets, his voice somewhere between tight and courteous. “How can I help?”

“Hi, Captain – I've got two-platoon's action report here for you, plus a copy of tonight's sentry rota.” Shurley runs a nervous hand over the back of his helmet, and he holds out a crumpled handful of papers. “We're set up at Leizartstraße, just overlooking the Engelsdorf MSR. Calahee's on there now with Rabine, and they'll be switching over every two and a half hours until sun-down. The details are on the rota.”

Castiel tucks the cigarette back into his mouth and takes the sheafs of paper from him. “Thank you.” He flips them over to glance through the first page, trusting that Shurley can dismiss himself, but then he hears him clear his throat, and he realises with a sinking sense of dread that Shurley isn't finished.

“And,” Shurley starts up tentatively, “I also just wanted to ask about rations--”

“What about them?”

Shurley hesitates. “Dowler and Hinton don't have any.”

Castiel lifts his eyes to meet Shurley's over the paper. “They should have been resupplied this morning.”

“Yeah, I know.” Shurley lets out his breath, deflating. “Only it turns out they didn't check properly, and they thought they still had loads leftover from their last supply, and they didn't realise until--”

Castiel takes the cigarette from his mouth. “And your platoon sergeant didn't think to check until we'd already moved into combat,” he interrupts, tone turning short.

“No.”

This is the last thing Castiel needs. Truthfully, he doesn't think it would be too much to expect that the men in his company could do their fucking jobs – that platoon-sergeants could keep track of their squads, and that platoon-leaders could keep track of their platoon-sergeants, so that it doesn't reach a point where they find out, elbow-deep in enemy territory, that there are men under Castiel's command without any fucking food. At least for tonight they have been pulled back as far as Koslar, so it'll be relatively straight-forward to get this passed on to Battalion, but the likelihood of Gabriel being able to get a supply officer up here tonight, before they move out on the assault again tomorrow, is small, and then what? Is he supposed to expect a supply officer to come out into active combat with a couple boxes of rations? And of course, when Castiel reports this to Battalion, as he duly must, who is going to receive the blame for this? Because Castiel knows that it won't be Shurley's platoon-sergeant who gets raked over

the coals for being a careless sack of walking incompetence.

He exhales, slow, around the shape of irritation rising in his throat. He tucks his cigarette between two fingers and holds it carefully aside as he scratches at helmet-rash on his temple. “How short are they?”

“They each have approximately a day's worth, plus a chocolate bar, I think,” Shurley says.

Jesus Christ. “Can the rest of your platoon cover them until I get word to Battalion?”

Shurley nods. “Pretty sure, yeah.”

“Then do it.” Castiel doesn't say what he wants to, which is to tell Shurley to take some fucking responsibility for his men. “I'll find you when I have a response from them.”

Shurley nods, and he gives a short nod to Dean, who Castiel has not looked at over the course of this conversation. Then he turns and disappears back down the street, towards his platoon, and after a moment, into the hush that Shurley has left behind, Dean says, “Reassigned where?”

Castiel doesn't look at him. “You'll be spending some time with the 112th Infantry on the Hürtgen front.”

“But – that's practically Belgium,” Dean says incredulously.

“Congratulations on your rudimentary understanding of European geography. Yes, it's towards Belgium.” Castiel is being an asshole, he knows that. He doesn't know how to stop. He thinks that if he tried, he would probably end up even worse, furious and terrified and unable to breathe.

Dean steps forwards. “Okay, did I say something wrong, or did I push you too--”

“No – fucking Christ.” The fact that Dean would even consider that Castiel might be an awful enough human being to do this out of spite cracks open something raw-edged in Castiel, and he looks over at him, openly horrified. “Dean, I wouldn't--”

“But you could have stopped them. You could have--”

“Winchester, while I am flattered that you seem to believe my authority is boundless--”

Dean doesn't even seem to be listening to him. “You don't know until you try, okay, you--”

“--I'm an infantry officer,” Castiel says, raising his voice over him, “not the fucking Adjutant General. I can't just--”

“You could at least ask them to--”

Castiel snaps. “No, I can't,” he bursts out, all his irritation and fear simmering hot to twist him into something ugly, and he near enough spits it. “Orders came from Division, and I didn't get a choice in the matter, because a Junker took out a whole fucking aid station

somewhere in Kleinhau, and apparently now the 112th needs you more than--" He cuts himself off sharply. He is breathing roughly, and he doesn't know what to do with all the anger stoked up in his throat, and he has said too much. He looks away past Dean. "They need you more."

Dean exhales, long and slow, his indignation deflating.

When he speaks, his voice is quiet. "Shit," he says. "You already tried, didn't you?"

Castiel won't look at him. He scrutinises his cigarette, now cold and unlit and dropping grey ash at the end. He flicks it away to land in the mud. "It's beyond my jurisdiction," he mutters.

"Yeah, yeah. Quit parroting the brass and fucking talk to me." Dean tilts his head over into Castiel's sight-line, eyebrows raised, and drags Castiel's gaze back towards him. "So am I coming back, or...?"

"I imagine General Gerhardt has better things to do than orchestrating the safe return of combat medics from temporary assignments, so probably not."

Dean clucks his tongue against his teeth. "Goddamnit."

Castiel exhales, long and slow, around the feeling that he is waiting for a grenade to go off. "Yeah."

Dean tries, "Maybe if I get myself to the repple-depple, I could--"

“If you get yourself injured,” Castiel points out. “But I would rather you didn't get yourself injured.”

“Shucks, sir.”

“And you could end up anywhere doing that. You could end up in a tank regiment – or in Italy.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “God, not Italy.” He raises his eyebrows, mouth pulling down into a grimace. “Well, at least now I know how to get my CO to warm up to me, huh.”

Castiel looks at him.

“I'm kidding. Relax.” Dean raises his eyebrows. “I know I never really won you over.”

Castiel tips his head over to one side. “I tolerate you,” he says.

“Because I'm so handsome.”

“And modest.”

“And modest, and funny, and charming,” Dean lists off, his smile tilting arrogantly into a thing that is smug and self-satisfied.

“Something like that,” Castiel says, and he looks at Dean, at the lopsided shape of his smile, at the green of his eyes in the yellowing

evening light. “You know,” he starts haltingly. “That's not--”

“Yeah,” Dean says. His voice is quiet, his words warm. “I know.”

There is four feet between them and what feels like the entire Battalion – officers discussing upcoming actions on the far pavement, two NCOs sharing the burden of an ammunition crate across the road, a runner blinking down at his list of orders, a deuce-and-a-half rumbling patiently on the corner. Sunset has painted the sky overhead in shades of muddy yellow, watercolour bleeding at the edge of the brushstrokes. On the horizon, there is the threat of approaching rain. Castiel looks at Dean and he wants him to stay.

“Excuse me – captain?”

Castiel turns to see a runner from Battalion who comes to a neat halt in front of him. “Is everything alright, private?”

The runner inclines his head sharply to approximate a salute before he goes on, “Fine, thank you, sir. The S-2 has new intel for tomorrow's assault. Tonight's briefing has been moved forwards from twenty-two-hundred to nineteen-hundred hours tonight. Additionally, the S-3 asks that I inform you of a change in patrol rota – Baker and Easy have switched, so you'll need to send out a small reconnaissance patrol from twenty-three-thirty.”

Castiel glances at his watch – eighteen-hundred-forty-three. Not a lot of advance warning, for the briefing or the patrol. “Thank you,” he says, and he shakes down his sleeve, already three steps ahead and planning who to send: Milligan, Doe, Tran, Pazhayattil, Slater. They'll need a marksman with them, just in case, and a radioman, and a medic. “I'll be there immediately.”

“Yes, sir. Permission to be dismissed, sir?”

“Granted.”

The runner turns and heads away down the street; for a moment, Castiel stands and just watches him walk away. He supposes it was too much to hope that he might get any time to himself – after all, there's a war on. He turns back to Dean, who is looking at him with a kind of resigned exasperation. Castiel says, “How do you feel about going on a midnight stroll tonight?”

Dean pulls a face. “I'd love to.”

“Thank you. I'll take you off the aid station rota tomorrow instead.”

“You trying to sweet-talk me, sir?” Dean teases, his mouth pulling up in a tired smile.

“No, I'm not.” Castiel rubs a hand over his mouth. He appreciates that Dean is only trying to make him laugh, but he has too much to think about to humour him. “I still need a casualty report from you by twenty-two-hundred hours.”

“Be still, my heart.”

“Winchester,” Castiel says, and he means it as a warning – *stop being an asshole, I'm not in the mood* – but it comes out wrong. It comes out soft, dejected, and the smile on Dean's face fades. Castiel says, “I'm sorry.”

Dean shakes his head. “Not your fault.”

Castiel isn't sure he believes that. “If it helps,” he starts, halting and uncertain, “I--” He swallows. “I asked them to take someone else.”

To his credit, Dean doesn't react. He just says, in a measured voice, “That sounds unprofessional.”

Castiel almost laughs. “It was. But... if it'd worked, it would've been worth it.”

Dean's hand lifts as though to reach for Castiel, but never quite makes it. His fingers hover, outstretched, in the space between them, and then his hand falls back to his side. “I'll get you those reports, sir,” he says, and he takes a neat step backwards.

“Thank you, sergeant,” Castiel says, and with a short nod as though to salute, Dean lets him pass. Castiel moves off down the street towards Battalion CP for the intelligence briefing, and he wishes he could have said more. He wishes he could freeze the whole damn war and give them more time.

3rd December, 1944

Under the cover of darkness, they advance.

Silent and steady, Baker Company moves in staggered file up from Koslar, wending through the trees at the side of MSR leading away to Barmen, four-platoon dropping back at the five-hundred yard mark to set up their mortar-stands, ready to cover with smoke. Castiel moves with them, tucked in with three-platoon. He has his collar flipped up

to hide his insignia, his binoculars tucked into his pocket. He doesn't want to earn himself a reputation for being the officer who sits safely at the back, and nor does he want the Germans to notice that there is a single man consistently giving orders from the rear. He sweeps his hand down over his M1, checking the ironsight, set to battle-zero, the clip, the flash suppressor fixed on the muzzle.

The night around them is bitterly cold, a stiff wind snapping across the open fields, bringing with it a misting rain to chill through Castiel's clothes, turn his knuckles blue, his fingers clumsy. Some five or six yards in front of him, Castiel sees the dim silhouette of Corporal Ellsworth lift a hand to signal – diversion point, platoons splitting down into squads to push carefully across the mine-field ahead. Castiel waits until he reaches the same spot where Ellsworth gave the signal, then turns to pass it on.

Castiel lifts a hand to wipe the rainwater from his face as he turns back to face the front. He follows three-platoon. It is just after oh-two-hundred hours and pitch-black, the clouds a thick tangle to block out all light. Castiel walks, and he tries to think tactically – *this may the only way to keep them from being able to see us coming* – rather than focusing on the more immediately concerning, which is that they are walking into a mine-field in the dark.

For the first time in a long time, Castiel thinks of the crucifix bouncing loosely at the bottom of a webbing pouch. He thinks that if ever he could do with divine intervention, he wouldn't mind it now.

There is no clear way to tell when they reach the mine-field; all Castiel knows is that no-one has stepped on one yet. Each rifle platoon is split down into squad, who move in a slow, careful single-file that weaves and winds its way forwards. Castiel moves slightly closer to Ellsworth in front of him, his heart hammering in his throat, and he thinks, *fuck maintaining clear spacings – if I can't see the man in front of me to follow the proven route, I'm going to buy the fucking farm before I even find the fucking proven route.*

They walk slowly, and Castiel's hands jitter on his rifle, and he tries to stay calm. Tension is ratcheting tighter and tighter all through his body until he can feel a dull ache twinge in his bad shoulder, and he swallows, and he keeps moving, keeps moving, and then overhead, the clouds shift, and a long stream of sharp white light is painted across the field.

Castiel freezes.

The moon behind them picks them out as clearly as if they had each been marked by a flare, casting perfect, neat silhouettes.

Up ahead, there is a hoarse yell in German, and Castiel shouts, “Take cover,” and then the enemy opens fire and someone towards two-platoon is flung back by a round through the chest, and they land hard on their back, and the mud explodes beneath them. Castiel drops to a knee, pulls his rifle up into his shoulder, and five yards from him, Ellsworth throws himself down into the mud to take cover from the rounds snapping past them, and there is a dull crunch beneath his knee, and Castiel yells wordlessly, curls himself sideways with an arm over his face, and the mine detonates. Ellsworth screams and screams, and there is blood dripping from Castiel's rifle, from the rim of his helmet, and when he lifts his head, he can see the same thing happening all along the line – men dropping to the ground to take cover and triggering mines.

“Medic!” someone calls past Castiel, in second-squad, and at the far end of first-squad, *medic, I need a fucking medic,* and across in two-platoon, *somebody get me a medic,* and Castiel keeps his mouth shut. He lowers his arm to look at Ellsworth, metal buried in his chest and throat and gut, blood pulsing out of his gaping mouth, and no leg below the thigh, and he knows there's no use.

Castiel stands and he moves, running for the centre of three-platoon to speak to Hester, and panic pulls his breath rapid and uneven from his lungs as he watches his feet and thinks, *proven route, proven route,* and

fuck, he can't remember if he's going the right way, if he's definitely seen someone take this path with getting blasted to pieces.

There is the hollow pound of the 88 kicking back against the dirt, and across their sector, Castiel hears, “Take cover, take cover!”, and then, just as Castiel is running for Hester, he catches sight of Dean going the opposite way, moving fast for scattered men with shrapnel wounds.

Fear seizes in Castiel's chest, thinking of Dean's stupid, blind courage, his selflessness. He lunges and grabs Dean's elbow by the sleeve as he passes, turning with him as they go their separate ways – and as Castiel's eyes track over the scuff on Dean's chin, the blood-mist spray over his collar and jaw, he says, “Winchester, don't--”

“--do anything stupid, I hear you--”

“--prioritise them over you,” Castiel corrects, as his hands slide from Dean's sleeve and pull away, still moving – backwards now, still facing Dean. “If you can't get to them, you leave them there. You wait for a mine-sweeper if you can't get to them safely, you put yourself first – do you understand me?”

“Think so, sir.” The thin silvery moonlight bleaches Dean of all colour. Castiel pulls his hands from Dean, turns, and keeps going, his head ducked low.

“Second-squad, flank left,” Shurley is yelling, dropping his head towards his chest as a mortar strikes some ten feet from his position, shattering a nearby window. “Turner and Horvat, up to the--”

Some thirty feet further behind him, Virgil with one-platoon: “Milligan, take them around – Ansley, hold – I said, fucking hold and wait for my signal--” and then there is a radioman knelt at his seven

o'clock, mouthpiece cupped in two hands like a drink of cold water, to cut off some of the chaos and din, as he shouts down the line *Baker-six, this is Baker-three with word from one-one, we are pinned, how do you copy*? and Castiel, with his rifle in his shoulder, pushes them forwards through the rain. They call in mortars and smoke from four-platoon to shield their way as the Germans fire into the mine-field, where Baker are trapped and floundering, terrified that every footstep will be their last.

Castiel lifts a hand to steady his helmet, swallowing the panic that rises in his throat to drown him, and they keep going.

4th December, 1944

Ducking his head through the doorway of the Battalion aid station, Castiel catches the eye of a harried-looking nurse washing her hands in a bowl of cold water. “Excuse me,” he says, and removes his helmet. “I'm looking for a Sergeant Winchester – T-4, a combat medic. Do you know where I could--”

“Down that way,” the nurse interrupts, and she points through the building, past row after row of army cots laden with feebly stirring casualties, through towards the main double doors.

Castiel follows her gaze, and then glances back to nod at her. “Thank you.” He moves through in the direction that she had pointed, weaving through the labyrinth of beds and supply crates until at last he comes into the main room, where he finds Dean and another nurse bent over one of a man who shakes and seizes and slowly pales.

“Winchester,” Castiel says, and hesitates, watching Dean dig hurriedly through his musette bag for his equipment.

“Little busy right now, captain,” Dean mutters, without looking up. On the table, Lugo – a replacement from Roanoke; a kid who likes baseball and the Marx brothers – jerks and shudders. His every inhalation rattles with a burning wheeze, and blood spills up over his lower lip. Dean has yanked Lugo's shirt up to his armpits, exposing a small wound that bubbles pale, frothing blood, and he wipes it away with a darkly sodden rag.

Castiel feels he should help, but he doesn't know what to do, so he watches uselessly from a little way back as Dean works quickly, fingers deftly unrolling gauze, a small square of foil. Dean snaps off a short strip of tapes that he holds between his lips while he stretches the foil tightly over the wound - “Hold on just a second, Frank, I got you, okay, just breathe,” he says, his voice a little muffled around the tape in his mouth – and he tapes the tautly-pulled tape down on three sides, leaving one side fluttering. Castiel can hear air flickering against the foil, and Dean works with the gauze now, as he repeats his slow, murmuring litany of, *it's okay, you're okay, I got you, it's gonna be fine*, until Lugo's slow, shuddering breath slowly becomes steadier, less rough.

“Fuck,” Lugo manages, his voice hoarse.

Dean looks over at him with a bright smile. “Hey, how are we doing?” His hands don't falter for a moment, carefully applying field dressing over the foil, passing bandaging under Lugo's waist to wrap around and hold it in place. He unwraps a syringe of morphine and jabs it into Lugo's thigh, and then reaches up to daub an M on his forehead. “Ready to get back out there and fuck up some Krauts?”

“Uh. Maybe,” Lugo says. Castiel watches the foil flutter against the skin as he speaks. “Well, I – can breathe. Almost. So, that's...”

“An improvement, huh,” Dean says. His smile widens. He ties off the end of the gauze, and slaps a hand to Lugo's knee. “You think you can lie on your side for me? Your left side. That okay?” He gets a hand

under Lugo's shoulder to help him. “There we go. Okay. You stay like that, you hear me? Stay lying on that side, and I'll be back in a while to check on you – but if you need anything, you just yell.”

Lugo takes a slow, rasping breath. “Sure thing, doc.”

Dean pats Lugo's knee again – a quick, almost thoughtless gesture of comfort, which has Lugo letting out a small sigh, closing his eyes in the knowledge that he's in good hands – and then he turns and starts walking. He comes past Castiel, working the rag over his hands to try and clean the blood away, and Castiel studies the moment when Dean is out of Lugo's sight-line, the moment his smile fades.

“What you after, sir?” Dean asks, and Castiel moves to follow him, not stupid enough to suggest that Dean stop working in order to speak to him.

“Casualty report,” Castiel says.

“Sucking chest wound, collapsed lung. He'll be fine, so long as nothing gets worse in the next few hours. He can be back in combat in a week or two.”

It isn't what Castiel was asking about. “Thanks,” he says. He follows Dean through the aid station, hovers awkwardly behind him and he waits as Dean as takes a de-tour to a cot-bed where an unfamiliar soldier is slumped, unconscious, with no leg beneath his left knee and a thick wedge of darkly stained gauze pressed to his gut. Dean presses two fingers under the man's jaw, pauses. After a moment, he is satisfied, and he continues on his way, Castiel trailing him. Castiel says, “And the others?”

“What others?” Dean says distractedly.

“The other casualties.”

Dean throws him a bewildered look over his shoulder, and then understanding dawns on his face. “The other--” He lets out a short sigh. “Sir, I don't really have time right now.”

Castiel hesitates. “The S-4 wants the reports in by seventeen-thirty hours.”

“Christ,” Dean bursts out, “I mean, he's the one who put me on this fucking shift in the first place, but--” He takes a deep breath, steadying. “Can't you get Ted or--”

“Du Mort was taken out the firefight early when he had to get Peterson evac'd,” Castiel says, and fuck, he hates doing this – hates that he has to enforce orders on goddamn fucking paperwork, and prioritise a report over Dean saving people's lives. “I already have the details on four-platoon's casualties from Fitzgerald, but you were with one- and two-platoon, where we sustained the heaviest losses, so--”

“Fine,” Dean interrupts, and he scrubs an exasperated hand down over his face. He leaves a dark smear of blood down from one nostril. “You got a pen?”

Castiel fumbles in his webbing for a pencil and a scrap of paper, and he follows Dean, scribbling, as he reels off names – McLellan, Randolph, Foreman, Lietz, Hutton, Turner, Van Allen. “Do you need me to take down any other details?” Castiel asks, dubious, as he eyes the list of names.

“No,” Dean says. “I'll remember. I can elaborate later.”

“Are you sure you'll--”

“Sir, I remember everything.”

Castiel doesn't push. He opens his mouth to thank him, to say that he'll see him later, and then the front doors of the aid station slam open and three men come in, hauling a shaking white-faced soldier from another company, and someone is yelling out, “We could do with a hand here--”

Instantly, Dean pushes past Castiel – a hand catching his arm as he passes, fingers grazing over forearm and elbow – and then he is across the room in a heartbeat to help lift the casualty up onto a table. His hands move fast and steady to assess damage, and they are speaking quickly – *puncture to the stomach without exit wounds and suspected liver damage, two lacerations to the thigh with arterial bleeding, you got a hemostat?* – and then Dean has a pair of what looks like a heavy pair of scissors in one hand and is forcing the end into the ragged mess of the casualty's leg, and Castiel has to look away.

“Jesus,” he says involuntarily, his stomach pitching. He swallows down the wave of nausea that rises in his throat and takes his cue to leave. Dean is busy, and will go on being busy indefinitely – this fragmentary list of names, crumpled in Castiel's fist, is as much as he can reasonably expect from him until his shift at the aid station is over. Castiel folds it into the pocket of his combat jacket, and he heads out into the cold.

To say that the last few days have been difficult would be an understatement. In assault after assault on Gut Hasenfeld, Baker and the rest of the 2nd Battalion have made next to no progress towards their objective – they've had the assistance of the 747th's tanks and the 92nd Chemical Battalion to cover with smoke and fire, but they still aren't getting anywhere. They were out all night pressing towards the

enemy positions, and at one point they were so trapped by German fire that they couldn't move, and had to option but to lie prone in the mud for four hours. The ground was too waterlogged for them to dig in and create a temporary position, and they couldn't withdraw; all they could do was wait. Castiel is soaked to the skin and chilled through, his fingers blue-tinged and shaky, and now he has to try and find a new tactic for their assault tonight.

Word from Gabriel this morning is that the situation is bad enough that their regimental commander was replaced for *combat inefficiency*. They answer now to Colonel Cassey, and naturally, shit rolls downhill, so Castiel has had his own fair share of *why isn't it done, what do you mean your men are exhausted and demoralised and falling apart,* but there is little he can do but keep going. Then, of course, there is the perpetual threat of Dean's departure hanging over his head – Castiel is trying hard not to think about it. He doesn't want to know what Baker will be like without Dean stitching them together at the seams.

Outside, the afternoon is crisp and cold, the sky blue and, for once, clear in a way that promises aerial bombardment when they move out later. Castiel moves through the narrow streets, stepping around shell-craters and heaps of rubble that NCOs from HQ slowly work to heave out of the way. He passes a heated discussion between Privates Zeddmore and Lance Corporal Miller, who swear and shout and make inflammatory comments about the men of the 747th.

“--those goddamn gasoline cowboys thinking they're better than us. Oh sure, I bet it's real easy to feel like a hotshot shooting Germans in a goddamn armoured house. I tell you what, I bet you anything, if you kick them out of their Sherman, they wouldn't be so cocksure.”

“Hear, hear. Now that's something I'd pay to see. If only we could--”

Beyond them, there is Nolan Fitzgerald unpacking a crate of medical supplies; there is Tran and Pazhayattil sat on the front step of a house whose second storey is crumbling and precarious, and they share a D-

ration bar, while along from them, Sergeants Harvelle and Milligan sit stripped out of their jackets, shirt-sleeves rolled up to arm-wrestle. There are officers conferring over maps, and non-coms in grave-faced discussion, and there is Westall, unfolding some strange, ungainly creation of maps glued together, and showing it carefully to Don Hanscum. He points at it, in one place and another, and explains, “No, see – so I've been working on it since we landed. It's every place we been and all the times I was thinking of her--”

“That's real sweet, Mick.”

Westall scowls and jerks the maps away. “Hey, shut the fuck up, okay.”

“I'm not being an asshole!” Hanscum says, injured. “It is, I think she'll like it.”

Westall relaxes. “Yeah? You think?”

They have a few hours here before they have to move back out, and Castiel is relieved to see the men taking it easy. It's only been a month or so since they were last on reserve, but working towards Jülich has been gruelling – trench warfare and knee-deep mud and mine-fields – and everyone is exhausted. The threat of combat fatigue is felt like a flare hanging low and sparking in the sky; it seems every week there is a report from someone in the Battalion having shot themselves through the foot or the hand or the face. The Battalion is low on men, and lower on morale, and every day that they return to uselessly fling themselves at Gut Hasenfeld, it gets worse – so Castiel is glad to see the return of some light-heartedness to his soldiers.

He turns a blind eye to the gambling, to the idiotic messages being scrawled on helmets with chunks of brick, to the strange and artful ways that various men are wearing their uniform – incorrectly – in

order to make themselves slightly warmer. In subzero temperatures, without any hint of a delivery of cold weather gear from supply officers, Castiel doesn't suppose it would be fair.

As he moves past three-platoon's second-squad arguing over whether Ginger Rogers was better-looking in *Tender Comrade* or *Roxie Hart*, Castiel finds Gabriel stood on the street corner, sheltering a cigarette between a cupped hand and his lighter.

Castiel approaches, and watches as Gabriel tries once, twice, three times to get his cigarette to light, to no avail. He twists left and right as though to protect the flame from the wind – on this still and clear afternoon – and then finally catches sight of Castiel.

“These fucking useless lighters,” Gabriel mutters around his cigarette. He stuffs his lighter into the pocket of his combat jacket and holds out a hand towards Castiel. “Here, gimme yours.”

“Yes, sir,” Castiel says, dead-pan – prompting a sarcastic *ha* from Gabriel – and he duly retrieves his own lighter from his jacket and passes it over. “Everything alright?”

Gabriel sucks at his cigarette until it catches, and then says, “Fine,” with pale smoke billowing from his mouth. He tosses the lighter back at Castiel, who catches it easily; Gabriel cocks his eyebrows up. “You know I can't complain down the ladder--”

Castiel nods. “Of course.”

“--so I'll just look away from you and announce to the air that Campbell is getting under my fucking skin.”

“Then I'll pretend not to have heard that,” Castiel says.

“He keeps grilling me about all the guys getting themselves killed or hospitalised like it's my goddamn fault no-one wants to play S-mine Hopscotch every fucking day,” Gabriel says, not even bothering to conceal the irritation in his voice. “And another thing – I feel like all these men shooting themselves in the foot to get outta service have no idea how delicate a foot actually is.” He throws his hands in the air. “They're thinking, *sure, small painful hole in my foot – that'll heal up and easy and I won't have to fight anymore.* And then reality is most of them blast the whole fucking thing to shit and need it amputated. Never walk again.”

Castiel hums in agreement.

“Jesus.” Gabriel throws him an exasperated look, eyebrows raised. “You think some of them would figure it out – a shoulder wound, I think that's the way to go.”

Castiel cants his head over. “Speaking as someone with a hole in their shoulder, I can attest it's not particularly enjoyable either.”

“You serious?”

“Shrapnel on Omaha.” Castiel pats the offending shoulder.

“Huh.” Gabriel pulls a face, reluctantly impressed. “No kidding.” He considers this for a moment, pulling on his cigarette, and then says, “I've never been hit.”

Castiel looks at him, startled. “Never?”

“Not by shrapnel, not by a round, not by a clump of dirt knocked up by a shell, nothing.” Gabriel is quiet, then. “My luck's probably gonna run out soon.”

“If Gut Hasenfeld keeps up like this, I think luck's going to run out for all of us,” Castiel says resignedly. He thinks of the mine-field – the way that every time they think they've found a safe route through, someone else will take a wrong step and lose both their legs – and of the railway gun tearing apart their heavy artillery support. He thinks of those six or seven simple concrete farm buildings, somehow just as impenetrable as the fortified bunkers they came up against in France.

Gabriel gives a short, bitter laugh. “You know I heard that they're getting nightly reinforcements from over the river? They've got a ferry or something. Dragging more men over to hold their positions.”

It doesn't surprise Castiel in the slightest. “And by contrast, we're having men actively taken from us.”

Gabriel kicks at a loose chunk of rubble. “Sorry.”

“They weren't your orders,” Castiel says. He's not so naïve as to think that just because Gabriel is the personnel officer enforcing the transfers, that it means Gabriel is the one behind it. There's not a lot that any of them can do to argue if Division puts their mind to something.

“Still sorry. Besides, Winchester seems like a good one.”

Castiel huffs out his breath. “He's a pain in the ass,” he says, and that's all. He doesn't know how else to evade the truth – that Dean is the

backbone of Baker Company, and the reason Castiel slept three hours last night without waking in a cold sweat with a strangled noise of panic caught in his throat, and the only thing that can ease the weight on his shoulders when he comes back from an assault with fewer men than he had when he left. Castiel knows that Gabriel and Dean have only met a handful of times, and only briefly at that, but that Gabriel can speak of Dean with admiration even so is something that flickers warmly in Castiel's chest.

He looks away over his shoulder at where Baker is scattered in ease and relaxtion, pretending they don't have to go back into the same old assault in a few hours. Castiel has been, to a degree, indulging in the same pretence, here with Gabriel. He has to write up some kind of medical report with the names that Dean gave him, and he has to go by First Sergeant Masters to pick up his report on equipment and ammunition, and he has to report to Battalion within the hour, and then he needs to speak to his platoon-leaders about future operations. He isn't looking forwards to it.

Castiel takes a deep breath, then, and looks back to Gabriel. “Well, I have some paperwork with my name on it,” he says reluctantly. “Enjoy your cigarette.”

“Will do.” Gabriel plucks it from his mouth, exhales smoke. “Good luck out there, later.”

Castiel grunts a half-hearted acknowledgement with a nod, and then he steps past Gabriel to move towards company CP. He could do with some luck, truthfully, but at this stage in the war, he thinks that it has been a long time coming.

5th December, 1944

“For inspection – report arms,” Castiel calls, and all along the line there is the rhythmic clanking of some hundred-odd men pulling back cocking handles, tilting their weapons over onto their right shoulder.

Alistair, Shurley, Hester, and Virgil each slowly make their way through their platoon – calling out, *clear, clear,* as they go – and Castiel, although he is not needed at this stage except to supervise, trails the length of the company. He peers over Sorento's shoulder, and he spares a glance for Chapman, and then he reaches the technicians at the end of one-platoon, and there is Du Mort standing patiently with his hands loose at his sides, and on his far side there is Dean with one arm held up, fist clenched at shoulder-level.

Castiel pauses, a frown tugging at his brow.

Without looking over at him, Dean's mouth pulls lopsidedly into a smirk. He goes on staring straight ahead, for all other appearances perfectly disciplined, and he says, “Arms for inspection, sir.”

A few ranks to the left, Bradbury bursts out with an ugly laugh.

Castiel says, “Shut the fuck up, Winchester.”

Bradbury goes on laughing, shoulders shaking where she stands at attention; a few soldiers down the file, Private Trenton shakes his head, and beyond him, Sergeant Milligan clears his throat. “Permission to speak, captain?”

“Granted.”

“I believe that pun was a court-martial worthy offense.”

Dean's smirk breaks into a wide grin.

“Denied.” Castiel isn't going to give them too hard a time – Baker have been struggling these past few weeks, and morale is low enough as it is without the men receiving a sharp dressing-down from their commanding officer just for trying to find some levity in the moments when they're not being shot at. Besides, it was almost funny, he thinks begrudgingly, although he would never say as much to Dean.

“Aw, come on, sir – you know,” Dean says, and he twists his arm to make a show of flexing – somewhat redundantly, since the bulky shape of his combat jacket gives no impression of muscle, “I think these are just as dangerous as the rest of them.”

Castiel glances back at Milligan. “Sergeant, I'm changing my answer.”

Milligan snorts, and as Castiel turns to check the next weapon, he hears Trenton add, “You hear that, Joe? Even the cap thinks Dean's full of shit.”

“I'd be worried about his judgement if he didn't.”

“Hey, settle down, gentlemen,” Dean starts up in a stage whisper, as they aren't supposed to be talking on parade, and Castiel, hearing him, considers that Dean is nothing if not consistent. “Just because you're jealous of my breathatking and immense physical prowess, alright--”

Baker's officers reach the ends of their respective platoons, and Castiel inspects the rifles of Hester, Shurley, Virgil, and Alistair, before pulling back the cocking handle of his own M1 for Virgil to check. Finally, he calls all clear, and they get formed back up, stood to

attention, for Castiel to go through the day's orders – one-platoon on a reconnaissance patrol from nineteen-thirty, which gives them about twenty minutes after they fall out to get ready; two-platoon on sentry at the eastern point of Koslar; a handful of men from four-platoon's second-squad helping out the Battalion supply officers; everybody back on parade for twenty-three-hundred hours ready to move out to Gut Hasenfeld.

“Those of you without specific orders, ensure your positions are secure and tidy, then just take it easy. Heat up some rations; get some sleep.” He glances across at his platoon-leaders. “Anything further?”

They shrug and shake their heads. From the second rank, Zeddmore raises his hand.

“Zeddmore?”

“It's Kevin's birthday today, sir.”

Castiel looks at him. “Happy birthday, Private Tran,” he says dutifully, and Tran's face breaks into open delight. “Anything else?” No hands go up; no-one speaks. “Alright. Parade – fall out.”

As the men of Baker turn all together on their heels and move out to follow their respective orders, Castiel's eyes track slowly over them. Every time they go out on assault, they come back with less than they moved out with, and it is reaching a point where the truth is undeniable: they are not strong enough to do this. There aren't enough of them, and they are tired, and they have tried everything. Castiel keeps thinking that maybe, eventually, Division will come to the same understanding, and the 116th will get pulled into reserve for a real chance to rest. So far, the likelihood is looking slim.

Castiel is so caught up in his thoughts – considering how he could reorganise Baker to optimise their combat performance; if there's any strategy for an offensive on Gut Hasenfeld that he hasn't tried yet which might result in fewer casualties – that he doesn't notice Dean still hovering on the parade ground until he is right in front of him.

“Winchester to Captain Novak,” Dean says, from three feet away, and he pulls a hand out of his pocket to wave between them. “Come in – do you copy?”

Castiel blinks back into the present. “Yeah, I copy. What do you want?”

Dean pulls a face. “World peace would be nice.”

“Oh, is that all?” Castiel says, dead-pan.

Actually, now that you mention, I could also do with some real long, bendy arms right about now, because there's this spot on my shoulder that's been itching since Aachen, and I just can't ever reach it – and you know, bless Don, he tries to get it for me, but it's just not--”

Castiel sighs. “Winchester.”

“I got you a present.”

“I don't want it,” Castiel says instantly. He can only guess at what it could be – something inappropriate, something idiotic to make him laugh, something to make him look ridiculous, something heartfelt to snag his breath in his throat and make him unable to look Dean in the eye.

Dean makes an affronted noise. “Unbelievable. The ingratitude.”

Castiel can't be bothered to humour him. “Winchester, I don't--”

“I promise you'll like it,” Dean says, and he digs into the pocket of his combats. Castiel opens his mouth to protest, to tell him to stop, but before he can get anywhere, Dean has pulled something from his pocket and tosses it towards him, with no more pre-amble than an airy, “Heads-up.”

For the split-second that it's in the air, Castiel sees that it's a crumpled metal tube, as of toothpaste, and then he catches it. He has his breath pent-up for a sigh, ready to tell Dean that he's a pain in his ass, and then he turns it over his hands, and he reads: *surgical jelly*.

Embarrassingly, it takes him a second. He stares at it, and he can feel Dean looking expectantly at him, and his brow creases up with a frown as he thinks, *why do I need--* and he realises.

Castiel nearly drops it. He fumbles, and he snatches it up safely, and stuffs it into the pocket of his combat pants as he rails on Dean, hissing, “Where the hell--”

Dean shrugs like it's nothing, but he rocks back on his heels in that way Castiel has come to read as full-body delight, and the tilt of his smile is smug. “Called in a favour with a field surgeon I used to serve with in the 104th.”

“You--” Castiel starts, and then loses track of what he's saying, because now his brain is stuck in an endlessly circling loop of Dean's cock and his hands and his mouth and his cock. “You – you could have – I

mean--”

Grin stretching wide, Dean arches his eyebrows. “You need help finding the rest of that sentence, captain?”

Castiel has no idea what he was trying to say, but it wasn't important. Dean wants to fuck him. Castiel is looking at his mouth – at the pink swell of his lower lip, his teeth, the wet hint of his tongue as he smiles – and he likes to think that over the months he has known Dean, he has improved his self-restraint, but he can't stop himself from imagining it. The solid weight of Dean, the thickness of his shoulders and arms, the sturdy curve of his legs; the way his hips would move, the way it would feel. Fuck. *Fuck.*

Castiel's mouth is dry, his cock already stirring in his combats, and he is staring at Dean, speechless, and then: “Sir, we're ready to move out.”

Startled, Castiel looks over to find Sergeant Masters at his side, a musette bag filled with spare ammunition clenched in one hand. “Pardon?”

“Ready to move out on patrol, sir.”

“Alright.” Castiel clears his throat. He barely glances at Dean. “Winchester, you're dismissed. I'll speak to you later. Masters, are you clear on your route and your contact procedure?”

“Yes, sir.” Masters pulls a map out of his pocket and unfolds it to double-check with Castiel, and Castiel decisively does not pay attention to the sound of Dean's fading footsteps as he walks away. He reviews Masters' intelligence, and he doesn't think about it, and he sketches in an 88 towards the Sportplatz that Masters doesn't have on

his map, and he doesn't think about it, and Castiel clears Masters and the rest of first-squad for patrol with a dry mouth and his brain spinning.

Castiel watches them move out and then pulls out his notebook to check patrol and sentry rotas, but as he reads, he is barely paying attention, thinking. He has to plan for tonight's assault, and he needs to make adjustments to his company structure following casualties, and he has to write up reports on ammunition use, and he has to put through another request for heavy artillery support after the intervention of the 747th fell through last time. He has do all this before twenty-one-hundred hours, and he has to report to a Battalion briefing at twenty-one-thirty, and there isn't a moment free that Castiel can find – preferably a few moments, although if they only get ten minutes and have to be quick then honestly, that's fine, Castiel can live with that – and then he is imagining it again, the heat of Dean's mouth and the rough touch of his hands and the bulk of him between Castiel's thighs, and Castiel drops his pencil into a puddle.

He needs a distraction. He needs to stop thinking.

Castiel returns to CP to review his action plan for tonight's assault – heavy mortar-fire from four-platoon and Able's artillerymen, bombarding the machine-gunner positions dug in along Gut Hasenfeld's walls to get their heads down while Able's men provide a supporting base of fire for Baker's push up through the minefield. If they move fast, they can reach outlying buildings for cover before the enemy call in artillery support, and in the last Battalion, Major Campbell even mentioned the possibility of an aerial bombardement from the Ninth Air Force to clear their path, as long the weather stays clear.

He checks radio channels; he checks his last reports from platoon-leaders on ammunition levels; he looks over the full layout of his company, judging the spread of technicians, the ratio of replacements to experienced soldiers in each platoon and in each squad, assessing which men are likely to be low in morale and need support. He eats half a tin of rations distractedly as he works, and he uses the tip of his

bayonet to carefully pick apart the corners of his map where moisture has crept through the cracks in his map-case and glued the paper together. He loses part of Erberich to torn paper and water-stains, but he can't find it in him to care.

By twenty-thirty-six, he has rushed through two reports and a losses write-up, and he moves for one-platoon in search of First Sergeant Masters. They should have returned from patrol just under thirty minutes ago, in which by now they should be at their usual position.

The fact that Dean is likely to be in the same place is something that Castiel only briefly considers five or six times in the walk over towards one-platoon's billeting, and he swallows down the urge to check his hair. Somehow, against all odds, Dean is interested in him as is, having seen him smeared in mud and blood and camouflage cream; his hair in disarray under his helmet is hardly going to be the breaking point.

Castiel knocks twice, and then he goes in. “Afternoon,” he says, and he removes his helmet. “As you were – is the First Sergeant here?”

The scattered members of one-platoon relax, and Private Lietz points through a narrow doorway into the next room. As Castiel moves through to find First Sergeant Masters, he glances around as though in idle distraction – Corporal Doe sprawled on the floor to lean against his haversack, Privates Sidoli and Horvat sharing a bottle of oil as they strip and clean their rifles; Dean Winchester sitting cross-legged with the contents of his musette bag laid out in front of him to reorganise his supplies. Castiel holds his breath, and walks into the next room.

There he finds Masters sat on a crate, an enormous pile of crumpled mail on his left side, a letter in one hand and pot of ink in the other as he censors inane messages home. Masters finishes daubing a thick purple line over one sentence, and then looks up. “Sir,” he says pleasantly. “How can I help?”

“I was wondering if I could run some company adjustments by you,” Castiel says. Masters knows the men, on the whole, better than anyone, and he trusts his judgement – not least because he has no reservations about being harshly critical, and will not spare Castiel's feelings if he thinks that his proposed reorganisation is a catastrophe waiting to happen.

Masters holds out a hand; Castiel digs into his pocket and passes him the slip of paper on which he has been writing out the names of every man in the company. It only takes three seconds for Masters to say, “Keep Montgomery and Sorento together. They argue but it's good-natured – if you split them up, Sorento turns it on other people and it gets ugly.”

“Noted.” Castiel stands beside Masters as he reads. He carefully does not look at Dean, but he can feel his eyes on him.

“And trying an even spread of replacements won't work, sir. Harvelle doesn't have the patience for more than three of them.”

“I thought that, but if he has Bradbury to support them--”

“Okay. That'll work.” Masters clucks his tongue against his teeth, still reading. “Sure. You know about Turner's ankle?”

“He twisted it a few days ago, correct?” Castiel asks.

“Mm-hm. Just to bear in mind. Otherwise, looks good, sir.”

“And you're alright going in with two-platoon?”

Masters looks at Castiel over the list, his eyebrows. “Captain, I'm not here to make friends,” he says drily. “I'll go where I'm needed.”

Castiel doesn't know that that's strictly true, as much as Masters might like to pretend as though he is utterly without attachment, but nonetheless, he says, “Thank you.” He takes back the list, and folds it away into his combat jacket.

“Anything else, sir?” Masters asks.

“No, that'll be all, sergeant,” Castiel says. He gives Masters a curt nod before he turns away to the rest of the room, and across fifteen feet and over the heads of four other people, Castiel meets Dean's eyes.

He is still trying to work out what he can say to get Dean alone, but before he can open his mouth, Dean is getting to his feet and crossing the space between them.

“Winchester,” Castiel says, calmly professional. “Is everything alright?”

“You know, sir, I meant to tell you – I've been called for aid station duty at twenty-two-hundred hours, so I won't be able to attend that briefing we talked about earlier--”

Castiel looks at him, the gears in his head turning.

“--but if you're free now, we could take this time to discuss--”

“Yes,” Castiel says. He clears his throat. “Now. Now is fine.”

“Are you sure, sir?”

“Fine.” Even as Castiel speaks, he is calculating whether it is actually fine – if he has time, if someone is going to come looking for him, if any of his platoons will be doing anything that could into a problem requiring his assistance or supervision, if seeing Dean means that his reports will be late – and he is coming up clear. There is nothing to stop them. “Yes, fine.”

Castiel looks away, his pulse drumming in his ears.

The rest of one-platoon is largely disinterested in the exchange; Sidoli and Horvat bicker in an undertone as they work to put their rifles back together, while Zeddmore writes a letter with his sheet of crumpled paper balanced on his knee. Doe's helmet is tipped over his face as he naps against his equipment, while Miller, Hanscum, and Bradbury heat a mug of coffee over a hexi-cooker. Of the whole group, Bradbury is the only one paying any attention. Her eyes move between them, but she says nothing. She stirs the congealing coffee with the end of a pencil.

Castiel says, “So. Company CP – if you--”

“Yes, sir,” Dean says. He is looking at Castiel's mouth. Castiel swallows, and he leads the way out.

They walk side-by-side, at a pace that is simultaneously brisk and

restrained. Castiel's mouth is dry. His fingers jitter at his sides, and he pushes a hand into the pocket of his combat pants to feel for the metal surgical jelly. The thought of it, and the pressure of his palm against his thigh, does little to calm his nerves. At his three o'clock, Dean is silent, walking just faster than Castiel so that Castiel has to push himself to the point where his calf muscles burn and it would almost be easier to jog. He sneaks a glance at Dean, his eyes flicking over his parted lips, the line of his jaw, the column of his throat.

“Here,” Castiel says, and he veers off left, into a low concrete building with broken shutters, the front face pockmarked with shrapnel wounds.

Dean follows. “I thought we were going to--”

“And so does everybody else,” Castiel interrupts, and he shuts the door behind them. He has made note of this building before – one storey, so easy to secure; not used for billeting or for supply room; cluttered with furniture that has been moved from other positions in order to clear room for troops, so it's largely a dumping ground – and although it's close enough to the street that they'll have to be quiet, it's otherwise almost perfect.

Castiel walks quickly through to the next room, navigating around boxes and armchairs and shattered bureaus. He spares approximately ten seconds for scoping out the windows, the furniture, establishing that even this small space is secure, and then he turns. Dean isn't even through the door yet, and he has a hand lifted to unclip his helmet, and within three steps Castiel is in his space, twining both arms around Dean's neck and pulling him into a kiss. It doesn't quite work; the rims of their helmets collide to jar them sideways, and Castiel half-misses Dean's mouth, catching only his upper lip. He lets the door swing closed behind them.

Dean finishes unclipping his helmet, palms it off, and drops it to the floor. He tilts his head over to one side to fit his mouth to Castiel's

properly, the hot curl of his tongue lighting sparks underneath Castiel's skin, and fuck, he wants him, he wants. Everything is fumbling, nothing coming quick enough – Castiel's fingers slipping on the zip of Dean's jacket, yanking roughly at his belt, Dean kissing him with an open-mouthed urgency that clicks their teeth together, inelegant, ungentle. They don't have a lot of time.

Sliding his hands over Dean's shoulders, Castiel pushes his jacket off, runs his hands down Dean's sides. It's hard to be patient when he can feel the shape of the tube of jelly in his pocket, and he's half-hard already just thinking about it – because Dean wants to fuck him, and he planned this, went to the Battalion aid station in search of something to help them do it, asked a friend for help and pulled strings until he got what he wanted.

Castiel lifts his rifle sling over his head, careful not to hit Dean in the face with the muzzle, and he lowers it to the floor – cocking-handle up, ready to go – and then he comes back, one hand at Dean's jaw, the other working at his belt. Dean's mouth is slack at the corner of Castiel's lips, panting ragged already as he jerks roughly at the opening of Castiel's pants. Even the blunt touch of the back of his hand, his knuckles bumping Castiel's underwear as he works Castiel's pants down, is enough to catch Castiel's breath in his throat.

Hands cold on Castiel's bare hips, Dean walks him backwards towards the wall, and Castiel doesn't let up for a moment, never an inch between them – pushing a hand up through Dean's hair, from the nape of his neck up to the crown, and holds him close, licks into his open mouth with heat. Castiel's back hits the wall, and he kisses him, and Dean bites back at his mouth, and Castiel pushes his hand down into Dean's underwear. Dean's breath stutters from the instant that Castiel fits his hand to Dean's cock. He tilts his forehead against Castiel's, his mouth falling open, and he sighs.

Castiel scratches his nails lightly through the back of Dean's hair, rubs his thumb over the head of Dean's cock, and Dean shudders against him, breathing ragged. His hips jerk forwards, pushing his cock into Castiel's hand, and so Castiel tightens his fingers as he jacks him,

moves his hand slightly faster, and Dean makes a low noise noise in the back of his throat that sparks heat underneath Castiel's skin, want and need curling in his gut.

“Yeah,” Dean says breathlessly. “Yeah, that's – fuck, Cas, yeah--” One of his hands slips from Castiel's hip, slides around the side to grab a handful of Castiel's ass, and hauls him forwards until he has Dean's thigh pressed up against his balls and he grinds forwards against him. The friction is perfect, hot and delicious, and Castiel can hear a groan rise from his throat, only smothered by him leaning in to push his tongue into Dean's mouth, to kiss him slow and deep.

Dean's fingers tighten on Castiel's ass, pulling him in closer, closer, to rock their hips together hard until the air is knocked out of Castiel's lungs, heat flaring underneath his skin. His hand slips over the head of Dean's cock, and Dean lets out a breath that Castiel hears as a low whistle, but when Castiel twists his palm over the head of Dean's cock, Dean's breath hitches, and the whistle keeps going.

Castiel stops moving. Dean becomes still, lifting his head, and the whistle builds to a shuddering roar.

“Fuck,” Castiel bursts out, and he shoves Dean away from him – away from the wall facing the street, towards cover – and he lunges for his helmet where it lies discarded on the floor, and then the shell hits.

The explosion echoes the length of the street and Castiel is frantically calculating as he slaps on his helmet, drags his pants up and fumbles with the button and zipper – it sounds as though the shell hit their three o'clock, down towards four-platoon, maybe two-hundred yards, maybe a little closer. Dean is struggling with the zip of his combat jacket, and Castiel retrieves Dean's helmet – “Dean!” and he tosses it, and Dean catches it without looking – and Castiel clips his own helmet's chinstrap.

He goes for his rifle, but Dean gets to it first, and Castiel grabs a handful of Dean's musette bag, and they thrust their respective equipment unceremoniously at each other, and Dean strides for the door first as Castiel loads his rifle, jerks the cocking-handle back to snap a round into the chamber, thumbs the safety catch.

Dean opens the door, stands back to let Castiel through, and Castiel moves with his rifle pulled up into his shoulder – snaps his aim across left, centre, right, centre to clear – and then hurries out into the street. Dean moves at his six o'clock, steady and sure, and when the next shell roars over to punch a smoking hole into the building some twenty yards from them, they flinch down in unison.

Castiel instinctively throws a hand out towards Dean. “Winchester--”

“Yeah, I'm good, I'm good--” Dean's own hand is curling into Castiel's sleeve. “We gotta--”

“There – now--” Castiel yells over the roar of the next shell screaming down towards them, and he hasn't yet raised his hand to indicate where they should be going, and Dean is leading the way.

Heads ducked low, they sprint across the street for the line of buildings where the majority of Easy Company are stationed, heading for an open doorway, and the next shell strikes hard in the centre of the road, lifts the flagstones and cobbles in a punch of smoke to crash down all around them like hailstones. Castiel pushes himself faster, faster, until he can feel his calf muscles screaming and he thinks that at any moment he's going to outrun his feet and fall flat on his face.

Dean reaches the doorway first, and then for some ridiculous reason he stops, he turns back – flinching down as the next shell comes screaming over, punches a hole in the asphalt and sends the whole street shivering – and he shouts, “Come on, come on--”

“Fucking get inside,” Castiel yells at him, and then he crashes into him hard, nearly bowls him over into the building, an empty supply room. They stumble and stagger together, and the next shell shakes the walls around them, smoke and brick-dust billowing in through the door and the open window.

Castiel has two hands on Dean's chest, trying to keep from toppling over, and he uses that grip to push at Dean and shove him towards cover – a table, a basement, anything low and sturdy that he can get beneath in case the whole fucking building comes down around them. Castiel needs to get to the rest of his men, needs to find his platoon-leaders.

Before Castiel can go anywhere, however, Dean says, “Wait--”

Dean grabs a handful of Castiel's jacket and pulls him back, turns him around and uses the momentum to tug him in and crush their mouths together. The kiss is sudden and searing, fierce enough that Castiel is bent backwards by it, his hands flying up to clutch at the front of Dean's jacket to keep himself upright, and Castiel is left dizzy.

It only lasts a moment before Dean pulls away, letting Castiel straighten up, and Castiel says breathlessly, “Not the fucking time, Winchester,” as their hands slip from each other.

“I'll get you later,” Dean says, and he thumbs distractedly at the corner of his mouth. “What we were – I'll – we'll do it.”

Castiel stares at him. “Okay,” he says.

The impact of the next shell, some hundred yards or so down the road,

brings with it a shower of sawdust from the rafters of the supply room to dust the tops of their helmets. With a great effort, Castiel tears his eyes from Dean and moves swiftly through the rooms and hallways to make his way down towards Baker.

There is a long passage between the houses, doors removed and holes knocked into walls, and in the next row of buildings along, Castiel finds four-platoon taking cover on the floor as the shells crash outside. The building shudders around, and Castiel ducks instinctively down, a hand coming up to protect the top of his head, but all that comes down around them is brick-dust and small chunks of plasterboard.

“Four-platoon, report,” he calls out.

From underneath a table, Montgomery replies, “All accounted for. Lieutenant Alistair is down towards third-squad – Cypress got dinged on his way in.”

“No other casualties?”

“No, sir.”

Castiel nods. “Where's your radioman?” he asks, and then the earth and sky start shaking again with the next shell coming over. He drops into a crouch, ducks his head into his chest, and Boniadi comes scrambling over with his radio mouth-piece in hand as the shell hits with an explosion that rings in Castiel's ears. “Baker-three, this is the six, how do you report? Come in--”

One-by-one, the rest of Baker checks in. Most of them were already indoors and within reach of cover, so casualties are minimal, but there are screams from the street of those who were not so lucky. Castiel orders them to stay down until the barrage is over, and he gets

Battalion on the radio for word on whether this is an offensive against which they need to be prepared to defend, and Major Campbell's voice crackles back – *just the railway gun – AA guns on stand-by in case of aerial bombardement, but stay low – prepare your men to rally moving the assault up to twenty-two-twenty – Able, Baker, and Charlie on Hasenfeld – –asblished sectors, how do you copy? Come in--*

When Koslar is still and settling from the impact, Castiel brings his men together. They load, shoulder their equipment, and they move to march on Gut Hasenfeld. Smoke comes firing down in front of the thick stone walls that surround the farm buildings, the 92nd Chemical Division firing in collaboration with four-platoon to destroy the enemy's visual, and then through the curling smoke and the hot white spitting of phosphorus, Castiel and the rest of Baker push back.

6th December, 1944

The sky over their heads is black with smoke and with thunder, and at the far edge of Baker's sector, there are three Shermans borrowed from the 747th, rolling with slow and unflinching menace across the open stretch of field, and when they fire it's a crack of thunder that rings in Castiel's ears. The shell punches an uneven hole in the stone wall, and they fire again, and Castiel tilts back to call towards four-platoon – *light artillery, aggressive fire, now*! - and the 60mms kick back against the ground to spit mortar shells, arcing high over their heads and then crashing hard around the buildings of Gut Hasenfeld.

“Move up,” Castiel yells, and drops down into a crouch some ten feet from two-platoon, pulls his rifle up into his shoulder, and fires. He fires until his clip snaps hotly past his face, emptying rounds into the thick swirl of smoke rising from the German defenses, and then he gets up and he moves.

Castiel finds four-platoon, calls in on their radio for a status update from Virgil, who is approaching the bunker's right flank; he calls down mortars on the suspected first gunner position, he calls in some smoke;

he returns to two-platoon to push two squads up while a third lays down suppressive fire. He watches as Hinton takes five rounds to the gut on his next aggressive bound forwards and has to be hauled out by Du Mort with two handfuls of his webbing, as Dowler's head is punched sideways by a round through the temple, as Buring and Pazhayattil rush up in their next bound only for a mine to crunch underfoot, spike up uncleanly through the meat of Buring's calf and then shatter.

When the advance grinds to a halt, Castiel pulls back far enough to survey the unfolding chaos – the Shermans moving steadily on the German position, pumping the concrete full of metal as they fire and fire; there is two-platoon pushing up in their wake; one- and three-platoon advancing in staggered file through the mine-field, halting and careful as they weave and dodge their way forwards; the shout and boom of four-platoon at the rear of the assault as they lay down their light artillery. Then he stops in his tracks because he can hear a faint, familiar rumble, a threatening thing that builds to a roar and a scream until he swears he can feel the ground shaking around him

For a moment, Castiel can't even pull himself together to give the order to take cover. He already knows that there is no cover. They are out in the open, with no high or low ground and nowhere to go except flat on their bellies on a field peppered with mines, and he is listening to the first shell of Jülich's railway gun build to a deafening roar. Fuck. His breath snags in his throat.

Down the line, Virgil screams, “Take cover, get into some--” and then the shell hits, and the Sherman at the front of the advance explodes into dark burst of fire.

Castiel flinches back, mouth falling open.

The other two tanks stop advancing.

All at once, Castiel realises that this is an opportunity – the Germans will be expecting them to scatter when the railway gun comes in to take out their heavy artillery. He twists at the waist to yell, “Radio, on me!”

Concino is there within seconds, mouth-piece in hand, and he takes Castiel's orders – two-platoon, suppressive base of fire on the nearest two buildings, divided by squads; one-platoon aggressive alternating bounds upwards on left flank as diversion, three-platoon pushing towards the first gunner position – and he shouts over the rattle of gunfire, the distant rumbling boom of shells exploding in Charlie's sector, the approaching thunder of the next railway gun shell. The Shermans are retreating now, fast as they can, and Castiel moves his men up.

Running hard, Harvelle and his squad push forwards, then drop into a crouch, pull rifles up, and Harvelle tilts his head back from his weapon to yell “Firing--” and some ten feet behind them, second squad picks themselves up, spearheaded by Lance Corporal Bradbury, to run after them under the steady cover of their fire. They sprint along the proven route, and the next shell is screaming over like a hurricane.

Castiel yells, “Keep moving,” as he sees a handful of the replacements in three-platoon falter at the shuddering roar, and he moves up to kick them into action because Jesus fuck, they do not have space in this operation for kids to be deciding they're scared of a shell and they don't want to fight anymore. He grabs Private Warren by the collar, hauls him up when it's his squad's turn to move. He shouts, “Go, go, move up!” and the next shell narrowly misses the remaining Shermans, punches up a thick column of smoke and dirt, and Castiel swears he feels the impact reverberate through his bones.

They run, and there is a dull, echoing noise, and then, as Hester rushes forwards with third-squad, a mine detonates under Jesse Turner's foot. It launches itself sharply into the air, shattering Turner's shin in the process, and Castiel opens his mouth to shout *take cover* but there isn't time. He flinches down, covers his face, and shrapnel

tears through Turner, and Milburn, and Hester goes down like his strings have been cut, landing heavily in the dirt. He doesn't get up.

“Medic--” Castiel yells, his panic blaring all worst-case scenarios inside his head as he runs for Hester. “Etheridge, you're IC, take them around--”

Sergeant Etheridge's head snaps up, fear plainly painted across his face, and Castiel recognises it – the instant of *what do you mean I'm in charge, I don't know what to do* – but Castiel doesn't have time to think about it. He runs – proven route, proven route – and for a heartstopping moment he sees the dark opening to an old rabbit warren and he thinks it's an unconcealed mine, but he passes unscathed. There is metal through Milburn and Turner and Conway, struggling on the ground, and within ten steps Castiel is at Hester's side – already attended by Sorento.

Hester lies flat on his back, staring upright with a glazed expression. He is blinking fast, his mouth open and slack. One of his legs is held out at an unnatural angle, blood seeping through the fabric; there is an additional dark blossom across his stomach. He breathes unsteadily. Sorento is yanking open the front of his combat jacket, hands searching out the torso injury, and Hester doesn't react.

“Hester,” Castiel says, dropping into a crouch beside him, and he is fumbling for the meagre first-aid kit in his webbing, for something to stop the bleeding. There is the unsteady drum of mortars exploding nearby, and Castiel flinches down, no idea if they're his or the German's. “Hester, if you wanted my attention, you could have radioed.”

He's trying to be funny – he's seen Dean do it, getting the casualty laughing, stop them being afraid – but it falls flat. Hester doesn't laugh. He doesn't do anything. It's more than slightly unnerving: Hester's leg looks as though it could well be snapped clean in half under his combats, and he's bleeding from his gut, as Sorento pushes

up his shirt to get at the wound, and he isn't screaming or crying or begging for his mother.

Sorento slips his hand under Hester's back, feels around tentatively. “No exit wound,” he says.

“Alright,” Castiel says, coming up triumphant from his webbing, and he pushes a wad of bandage at Sorento. “Get that on there, put pressure on it. I'll do what I can with his leg. Hester, hold on – this might hurt--” Castiel tears the fabric of Hester's combats away from his leg to get at the break, accidentally jostling the injury in the process, and Hester doesn't react. He goes on blinking up at the clouded sky.

Castiel looks up at him.

“Novak, I think--” Hester says faintly, his eyes unfocused. “I think I'm hit. I can't--”

“You're okay, Hester,” Castiel says, even as his mouth is coming up dry. “You're okay. You're not done here. You're going to be fine.”

“But I – my legs, Castiel, I can't--”

Castiel swallows, and at that moment, Dean crashes down beside him, gauze and scissors in hand. His blood-dark hands are moving swiftly to crank a tourniquet tight around Hester's leg over the break and pinch off the bleeding.

“I got this,” Dean shouts over the gunfire and crash of mortars, not looking up as he works. “You did good, sir, now get outta here, I got

this--”

Castiel slaps a hand to Dean's shoulder, grateful. He gets up and he runs.

“Move, move, move,” Castiel yells, redirecting Etheridge's route at the front with short, sharp gestures, his hand flatly outwards. He drops back, then, brings up Concino with the radio - “Baker-four-one, this is the six – I need mortars effective immediately, deliberate rate of fire at three-four-oh-two--” and then he cuts himself abruptly off as he hears the beginnings of another low, rumbling growl, building to a roar, and he drops the mouth-piece. “Take cover!” he yells, and his voice cracks. He twists at the waist to face his men. “Take cover, clear the--”

His voice is lost to the impact.

The railway gun's 40cm shell lands twenty or so yards behind Castiel but it takes him to his knees, and he feels panic spike into his throat – he's going to hit a mine, fuck, *fuck* – and he drops hard against the ground as it bucks up violently to meet him, the side of his head hitting the dirt so that his skull vibrates within his helmet. Somehow, the ground doesn't instantly explode around him, and so he curls himself up small and tries to breathe.

Hissing shrapnel buries itself in the wet soil a few feet from him, buries itself deep into the dirt; Castiel stares at it, wide-eyed, but then the next shell is coming, the sky split with a sound like a speeding freight train, and he has to move.

He scrambles up onto his feet and runs. He comes across Concino curled against the dirt, and Castiel gets a handful of his combats to haul him up and help him along – “Come on, let's go, private, get clear and get some fucking cover!” - and then he realises that Concino is dead weight and there is a blackened hole the size of a fist through

the front of his head, shrapnel still smoking.

Castiel recoils. Drops him like an anchor and stumbles over his own feet to get away. He feels bile rise hot and acrid in his throat, and he keeps moving before he can think about it. He finds his men. He pushes them onwards and onwards, and all around them, Gut Hasenfeld is burning.

Word comes on the radio that it's much the same along the rest of the 116th's line – at the Sportplatz, at the swimming pool complex – and eventually Battalion pulls them back. Sometimes, when this happens, Castiel thinks that the brass are being too cautious, that they could have left Baker and the rest of the 2nd Battalion in for longer, that they could have let them make more progress. Today is not one of those days.

They haul bodies out of the assault and they retreat back to Koslar, a slow march in three files and in silence. Castiel tries to make himself focus on the rhythmic one-two-one-two of his footsteps, wanting the steady drumming of it to beat out all other thoughts in his head, but his mind keeps coming back to Hester. Castiel's not naïve; he knows the shrapnel that Hester took to the gut also broke his spine. Hester was by turns an insufferable know-it-all and a resentful prick, but he didn't deserve that.

As he walks, Castiel stretches his hand at his side until his knuckles crack. He flexes his fingers and lets the dull ache of it ground him.

Back in Koslar, they are relieved by Dog Company, who move out swift and sure with the 92nd Chemical Division to try and smoke the Germans out. By this point, Castiel doesn't pause to gauge how successful Battalion's new tactic might be – he is tired of thinking about it. He gets his men formed up at ease to take on water, to check ammunition levels, to report to their platoon-sergeants.

Sergeant Harvelle picks at a jammed M1 clip, carefully pulling the rounds out; Private Tran offers squares of his D-ration bar to the other men in his squad, who laud him as their mother, their Saviour, and the love of their lives all in one; three-platoon, with Sergeant Etheridge unsure of himself at their head, is grave-faced and quiet.

Castiel approaches. “Sergeant,” he says grimly. “Congratulations.”

Etheridge doesn't smile. “Yes, sir.”

“How are you feeling?”

There is a beat. “Busy,” Etheridge says, tactfully, after a moment. Under the circumstances, Castiel doesn't think he would have admitted to being terrified either.

“It'll only be temporary until Battalion can supply another officer,” Castiel says, and Etheridge, for all his bravado, sags visibly with relief. “But you did well today. I couldn't have asked for more, sergeant.”

The expression that flickers over Etheridge's face is warm and grateful. “Thank you, sir.”

Castiel moves, then, amongst the rank and file – helping Zeddmore with the broken strap of his webbing, checking on Private Sidoli as he blinks through the blood drying on his face. He talks to the men and he keeps himself busy as they wait for word from Battalion on their next movements, and Castiel does his best to pretend that this – this rag-tag, tired, beaten-down collection of just a hundred men – is enough. Hanscum is tunelessly humming as Tran tries to guess the song – *Chattanooga Choo Choo? No, no, wait. At Last?* - and Private Ansley is silent and shaking, and Dean is among one-platoon telling the same three jokes. The shape of his smile is hollow, and there is

blood on his face and hands. The frenzy of his comedic gesticulating almost conceals the way that his fingers are trembling. Castiel doesn't think of Concino, or of Jesse Turner, or of Hester. He tries hard not to think at all.

At last, they get word from the S-3 – another reconnaissance patrol out as far as Rurauenstraße at twenty-one hundred hours but until then, stand down and wait. Castiel's heart sinks. In his experience, the waiting is worse; any temporary reprieve only makes it harder to go back.

Castiel calls Baker to attention, gives his orders – reinforce defensive positions; weapons' cleaning; Masters to apporach Battalion supply officers for rations, ammunition, and cigarettes; platoon-leaders to review intelligence and update maps – and then, finally, he dismisses them.

As he watches the fall out and trickle away down the street in either direction, exhaustion settles heavy on him again. He has to write up today's action report; he has to inform Battalion of the loss of a platoon-leader; he has to reorganise the whole company to keep three-platoon from collpasing inwards in the interim; he has to plan a new assault for tomorrow, and conflate with the other company COs to see if anyone is making any progress, and all this before they move out in just a few hours.y

With a sigh, Castiel rubs a hand over his jaw and steels himself for the agony of an endless few hours' paperwork.

Company CP waits for him, quiet and still, dust collecting on the crates and sifting slowly along the concrete floor when the open door brings with it a curl of cool air. He moves automatically to check the perimeter – windows, secure; back door, secure; upstairs, empty – and then he drops heavily to sit on the crate towards the back corner. Eyes on both exits, angled so that there is no room for anything to surprise him at his six, but so that he cannot be easily cut off from either way out.

He gets to work.

Castiel writes up the details of the assault, collecting reports from platoon-leaders as they come by one by one; he hastily cobbles together a report for three-platoon, and he writes up a spare copy for Battalion, for when he goes to speak to them about Hester's replacement; he edits his map with pencil and compass, making notes of new intelligence, as well as a scribbled comment on a scrap of paper tucked into his map-case regarding strategies that the 2nd Battalion have tried so far, and their comparative successes or failures. He brings in Virgil to discuss company reorganisation – Sergeant Harvelle to three-platoon as platoon-sergeant, Corporal Doe to fill Harvelle's role, swap out Tran, Blake, and Lance Corporal Miller, with the handful of replacements just received in three-platoon's second-squad – and he works with Naomi and Cain on the next assault tonight. He puts together a hasty sand table with whatever material he can find within thirty feet, and he maps out strategies into Gut Hasenfeld that they haven't tried yet, tactics which they've tried unsuccessfully which could be adapated, plans so shot full of figurative and literal holes that he can at least look back and figure out where they went wrong. He writes up letters home – *ma'am, it is with regret I write to inform you* – until his hands cramp and his fingers are stained blue with ink.

Through the CP door falls a rectangle of dusty, pale light, the afternoon outside grey and thin and threatening rain. Castiel smokes one cigarette down to embers, and then another, and over the growing piles of paperwork, he watches as that rectangle painted over the floorboards gradually shifts and stretches and fades with the cold onset of evening. Then, just after nineteen-hundred hours, there is a loud, ostentatious *rat-tat-tat* on the door and there is Dean.

“Hey, captain,” Dean says, and he strides right in. At this stage, Castiel has given up trying to get him to wait for permission; he may as well try to stop the tide. Dean takes a few steps towards Castiel, but then is distracted, his attention caught by the sand table set out on top of Castiel's spread shelter-half. “This looks artful.”

“Thank you,” Castiel says, still engrossed in a map of the Rhineland – pencilling in recorded enemy movements, as well as the movement of the rest of the 29th Infantry, as the 84th Infantry push across towards Wuerm and Muellendorf.

Dean contemplates the table, his head tilting. “And surprisingly simple.”

Castiel doesn't look up. “That would be because of our lack of progress.”

Dean grunts dispassionately. He drops into a crouch to get closer and he studies it, his back turned to Castiel. After a beat, he says, “So where's the minefield?”

“The broken gravel.”

For a moment, Dean is quiet, considering. Then: “That's all of it.”

Castiel lifts his eyes over his maps. “You noticed that, too?”

Dean half-twists to look at him. Castiel raises his eyebrows, and Dean just says, “Christ.”

Sighing heavily, Dean turns back to the sand table, and Castiel doesn't immediately get back to work. There are a few seconds when Castiel's gaze lingers on the stretch of Dean's combats as he crouches, the fabric pulled taut over his ass and thighs

Without turning around, Dean says, “Quit looking at my ass.”

Castiel drops his eyes. “I wasn't,” he lies, and he sets his pencil down, instead hauling himself up to stand beside Dean and talk him through his tactical creation.

It is, at best, imaginative, and so Castiel explains – the battered old cans, representing the farm buildings, and the chunks of red brick to stand in for enemy 88s; he points to the string indicating arcs of fire, the pencil stubs lined up neatly to indicate the rest of the 116th in their respective positions out east. Dean follows Castiel's pointing hand, occasionally touching something with careful, steady hands. Castiel has a rule about people touching his sand tables – namely, they don't – but he lets Dean fiddle, experimentally moving rocks and paper-clips and balled-up clumps of paper.

Dean toys with a rusty nail that Castiel has set out to represent the 747th, turning it over slowly between his fingers. “So where on here is the area where the railway gun can get us?” he asks.

“Everywhere. We have no cover from it – except perhaps inside the German bunkers,” Castiel mutters. “If they hit us, we just have to pull back. There's nothing else we can do. We'll be attacking in synchronisation with the rest of the regiment, so... they can't fire upon all of us. One day or another we won't be the focus.” He trails off, looking over the sand table, and he can't keep himself from replaying the last time they came under fire from the railway gun. He remembers the impact like an earthquake. He remembers it tearing his men to shreds. “But if we are targeted, we can't stand up to that kind of firepower; it would be mass suicide. We have to just pull back.”

Dean lets out a whistle between his teeth, dragging the note out long and low. He mimics the sound of a shell coming over right up to the point where it should explode, and then he is silent. He scratches at

the rim of his helmet with his knuckles. He sets the 747th's rusty nail down onto the sand table, and he and Castiel stand by side in silence, looking down at what remains of the 116th's offensive operation. Castiel knows that Dean doesn't have a tactical eye; he wonders what Dean sees at a glance when he sees it all laid out like this. He wonders if Dean can tell that they're fucked.

Castiel exhales, slow and heavy. He stares down at the dented cans, and the expanse of space around them where Baker have never got close enough to recon the terrain, and he says, “We've been hitting the same position over and over for days, and we're not getting anywhere.”

Dean turns his head to look at him. He doesn't say anything.

“We started this operation at three-quarters strength – we're nearing half-strength now. We've lost thirty-two men--”

“Thirty-four,” Dean says distractedly.

“Thirty-four.” Castiel looks at him. “We've lost thirty-four men so far,” he says, his voice bleak, “and that's when we still have all our fucking medics.”

Dean tips his head up, half-nodding, as though he knew – he knew this what was the conversation was coming to. His mouth twists ruefully. “Ted and Nolan are good at their jobs,” he says. “They can manage.”

“I know they can manage, but the fact remains that we will be down one medic – our senior medic, specifically – our most experienced and capable medic--”

Dean grins. “Sir, you trying to butter me up?”

Castiel ignores him, and keeps going: “--and I wasn't joking when I said that I believe you are near single-handedly responsible for morale being as high as it is. We're almost at half-strength, and the men are already disheartened, and nobody wants to be here, and if you go...” He trails off and glances away past Dean, his jaw squarely set. Past them, the thinning light that spills through the open door is bleeding through hazy orange and purple as the sun sinks. It softens the already-dim room, leaves Dean's freckles indistinct with shadow.

“Maybe I won't be gone long,” Dean says. “Maybe I'll get to come back after.”

Castiel levels Dean with a weary look. “As much as I admire your capacity for unwavering optimism--”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Here we go.”

“--I feel I have to make this clear: the United States army does not care you. They are not going to waste their time and limited resources ensuring that every single infantryman they reassign gets safely returned to his unit – much less,” Castiel says emphatically, and raises his voice he sees Dean open his mouth to interrupt, “if the infantryman in question was not originally a part of that unit anyway.”

He arches his eyebrows, daring Dean to argue.

Unsurprisingly, Dean argues. “Maybe I'll be the exception to that rule.”

“You're incorrigible. You know, good looks and an inability to shut your mouth won't serve you forever.”

Dean's smile turns smug. “Worked out pretty well for me so far, doll.”

“Don't call me that,” Castiel says. He knows that Dean is capable of taking things seriously; he just seems inherently averse to it, and it sparks annoyance under Castiel's skin. Dean is trying to flirt with him as a distraction, and he doesn't appreciate it. “They aren't going to borrow you, Dean. This will be permanent.”

“Jeez. Okay, fine, it's real shitty. What do you want me to do about it?” Dean asks, and Castiel can hear that there is irritation in his voice now, too. “Gimme your rifle, I'll shoot myself in the foot. You do you – hell, we can have matching scars.”

“Don't be absurd.”

“Then what?”

“I don't know,” Castiel snaps. “I don't have an answer, I just want you to stop treating this like everything is fine.”

Dean turns to face him full-on. He steps in close so that there is less than a foot of space between them, and he holds himself tall, challenging. “What the hell do you want from me, Cas?” he asks, his tone skirting condescension. “You want me to tear out my hair and cry?”

Castiel looks away, sullen. “It'd be a start,” he says, but he knows he's just being petulant for the sake of it now.

“Right. I'll put it on my goddamn to-do list,” Dean says bluntly. “As far as I understand it – and you tell me if I'm wrong here, okay, if I'm barking up the wrong tree, you feel free to interrupt – there is nix and shit we can do about it. So what the fuck is me getting upset gonna do?”

Castiel doesn't interrupt him – Dean's not wrong. He just says quietly, “I don't want you to go.”

All of Dean's anger seems to deflate. The tension set high in his shoulders seeps slowly away, his spine sagging. “I ain't exactly thrilled, here, either,” Dean says, exasperation heavy in his tone. “I mean – Cas. Hey. Look at me.”

Reluctantly, Castiel meets Dean's eyes.

“I just – at any given point someone could come up and tell me I've got three days left,” Dean says, and his voice has gone soft now. “Three days, and that's it. And you're right – I'm probably not gonna come back.”

It is a rare thing for Castiel to be in the right about something – and more so for Dean to admit it. Castiel thinks he should get some satisfaction out of this small victory, but he doesn't. He wishes he could be wrong on this one.

“I don't have a lot of time,” Dean goes on, and he folds his arms decisively across his chest. “So excuse me if I don't wanna waste it feeling sorry for myself. You do what you want with the time we've got, but I'm not doing that.”

Castiel doesn't answer. He understands where Dean is coming from, but he doesn't know how to detach himself from what is coming. He spends so much of his time constantly worrying about what comes next – where he moves his men, where the enemy will strike next against him, what the safest route is – and so the idea of just ignoring the ticking clock, of pretending that everything is fine right up until the second that Dean gets pulled into a Ninth Army deuce-and-a-half and hauled away south, is completely alien to him.

“It might not change anything, but I can't just forget it,” Castiel says. “Every time I look at you--” He doesn't get any further; he doesn't know what he's trying to say. He trails off, and he stares at Dean, searching for how to say that he has fucked up so much of what he and Dean could have had, and they are only just starting to figure it out now, and they need more time.

Before he can find the words for any of it, there is a knock on the door into the CP, and Castiel looks past Dean to find Lieutenant Virgil in the doorway.

“Captain Novak,” Virgil says, with a respectful nod. “Winchester. Am I interrupting?”

“No.” Castiel takes a step back from Dean. “Winchester and I were just finished. How can I help?”

Virgil removes his helmet. “I have some new intel that might interest you, courtesy of Fox Company. Do you have your map?”

“Here.” Castiel crosses to where he left his map case laid open on the floor.

To get at it, he has to sidestep Dean, who is staring down at Castiel's sand-table and rubbing a thumb distractedly over the rim of his helmet. He looks as though he is trying to find a reason to hang around, but Castiel knows that would be impractical, and knows that Dean has more important places to be than waiting for Castiel, worrying about the threat of an imminent transfer.

Castiel picks up the map, and passes it across to Virgil. Then, as Virgil unfolds it to add whatever new intelligence he has found, Castiel steps back towards Dean. He carefully tilts his body to block Virgil's view with his back, and he says, “Thank you, Winchester. I'll find you later to follow up on that report,” and then – with his heart beating fast in his throat and his mouth coming up dry – he reaches out and he takes Dean's hand.

Dean lifts his head to look at Castiel. His expression is something startled and soft, and his fingers curl hesitantly through Castiel's. “Yes, sir.”

Castiel's thumb sweeps over Dean's knuckles, and then that's all they have time for. He lets go of Dean's hand, and turns back to Virgil, who has a pencil out and ready, already beginning to sketch across the map. There are footsteps behind Castiel – across the floorboards and out into the street – as Virgil draws, and Castiel half-turns his head to watch the door swing closed behind Dean.

Virgil starts, “I was just speaking to Lieutenant Adina from Fox Company, and he drew my attention to a causeway not marked on our maps – call it three-six-one, two-two-four – which could ostensibly be another route into Gut Hasenfeld from towards the Barmen MSR.”

“That's beyond our sector,” Castiel says, but he's considering it.

“It is, but if it's something that we overlooked, then could it not be

possible that the enemy has overlooked it as well?" Virgil points, his finger sweeping a slow arc across the map as he speaks. "We could use our direct assault as a diversionary tactic to conceal movement of another platoon – or potentially, another entire company, if you can get Able on board – to move up towards their left flank that way to try and get some enfilading fire down."

Castiel's eyes move across the map, checking current positions, comparing with the positions he has set up for Baker on his sand-table. "If we get smoke down towards the left side of our sector, we can cover their movements – move up one-platoon through the smoke to keep the attention from the causeway, with a suppresive base of fire back from this point here." He digs in his combat jacket for his pencil, and draws a faint cross over the edge of one grid near Gut Hasenfeld's front wall. "Alternatively, if we split four-platoon we can get cover for them as they move and have the potential to do some real mortar damage on their positions."

It's a good plan; more importantly, it's one that they haven't tried before, and Castiel is curently running short on new ideas. He checks his watch – just over an hour before they move out. He'll need to brief his platoon-leaders on final action plans at least a half-hour before they form up, which means that if he wants to implement this new strategy for the patrol and the consequent likely assault, he'll need to communicate it to the other company COs immediately.

It's almost feasible, he decides as he thanks Virgil and packs up his equipment – and at this stage in the operation, almost feasible is a Godsend. He'll take what he can get.

7th December, 1944

With the paper still clenched tight to the point of creasing in his hand, Castiel moves. He walks as fast as he can, calf muscles burning – he doesn't run, he doesn't – veers sharply around the corner to where Dean and the rest of one-platoon are billeted. He hurries to sidestep

NCOs moving equipment with *excuse me, excuse me,* and he forces himself to breathe steady, and he walks with urgency until he comes to one-platoon. He takes the front steps two at a time, and he pushes in with his shoulder, and then he stops.

Most of first-squad – and most of Dean's friends – are collected in the front room, passing cigarettes and rations back and forth. Tran scrubs a meagre amount of polish from a near-empty tin onto the toes of his boots; Bradbury, Hanscum, and Pazhayattil are sat cross-legged on the floor playing cards; Sergeant Harvelle cups his hands in front of his face and blows warm air into his palms. Dean is nowhere to be seen.

Harvelle lifts his head. “Sir--” he says, and he and everyone else in the room start to scramble awkwardly their feet.

“As you were,” Castiel says. “Winchester. Where's--”

Harvelle shakes his sleeve back to check his watch. “He should've come off duty at the aid station a half hour ago. He's probably still there – or he might've got distracted by three-platoon on the way back. You want us to--”

“Thank you,” Castiel interrupts. “Carry on.”

He is gone in an instant, shoving out through the front door before Harvelle can say another word, and it takes everything in him not to run. He walks, and he breathes, and his fingers tighten on the letter until it crumples, and he breathes, and then there – at the end of the road, there, walking slowly back with his hands in his pockets and his helmet unclipped – is Dean.

As he approaches, Dean lifts his head, and his expression moves through pleased recognition to something startled and edged with

concern. “Sir--”

With his heart beating like a bird in his chest, Castiel comes to a breathless halt in front of him, and he realises only once Dean looks at him, bewildered, that he hasn't planned what he's going to say. The first thing out of his mouth is this, half-garbled: “Seventy-six hours.”

Dean stares at him, and then slowly, understanding settles on his face, and his eyes drop to the paper in Castiel's hand. He takes a deep breath. “That's it, huh.”

“Seventy-six hours,” Castiel says again, his breath misting ahead of his face in the cold. He calculated on the way over here. He doesn't know how to feel – part of him thinks it's generous, the extra four hours together that they've been given. Then, distantly, there is a part of him recognising that he was promised the duration of this operation, that the transfer wouldn't interfere with their assault on the west bank, that Dean would remain safely in the hands of the 116th until they were next pulled into reserve. Mostly, he is just struck with the knowledge that this is real, now. It's happening. He holds out the paper. “For you. It's--”

Wordlessly, Dean takes the paper. He stoops to flatten it against his knee, and then reads.

Castiel can't just stand here and watch Dean's expression slowly change as he takes the information in; he glances away, over Dean's shoulder, and then away down the street. Koslar is quietly busy, the town painted in muted blues and greys with wintry sunlight glinting whitely off the remaining windowpanes. There is a Sherman at the far end of the street, two soldiers hanging out of the top with cigarette smoke rising in a pale twist over their heads; beyond them are the flickering lights of Jülich and the Sporzplatz.

Finally, Dean says, “Damn it.”

Castiel looks at him.

Dean straightens, rolling his shoulders back. He doesn't meet Castiel's eyes; he folds the letter unevenly into quarters and pushes it into the pocket of his combats. “Just starting to like it here, too.” He lets out his breath, long and slow. “So. Seventy-six hours. That's, what--”

“Twenty-hundred hours, three days from now.”

Dean lifts his eyes, his expression quietly resigned. Castiel sees for the first time that Dean is taking this seriously, and Castiel hates it. He can see Dean's brain work, can hear it ticking: three days, and most days they are out there being shelled without reprieve, leaving them lucky to even find time to talk to each other – and that, frequently, not alone but surrounded by the rest of Baker, so that Castiel can't be honest with himself, can't let himself smile or look at Dean's mouth, can't reach out to graze his fingers over the back of Dean's hand.

They just stand there looking at each other, Castiel with his hands at his sides, clenching, unclenching; Dean holding his breath. Castiel is agonisingly aware of the platoon on parade some fifty yards down the street, of the officers walking down the far sidewalk, of the movement of Battalion runners up and down the cobbles between the crumbling buildings. Castiel wonders, if he kissed him just quickly, whether they might get away with it.

Dean's eyes fall to Castiel's mouth, and it is a look without heat. He looks lost. Castiel doesn't know what to say to him.

“Captain,” Dean says after a moment, halting and hesitant. “Can I just say – this is a little premature, but, uh. That it was honour serving--”

“Don't start that shit with me,” Castiel interrupts. “We're not doing that.”

Dean faces softens; the corner of his mouth turns up into a smile. “My, my. That was almost romantic. Sir, are we having a moment here?”

Castiel rolls his eyes. “Not anymore we aren't.”

“Not that I would, you know – mind.” Dean clears his throat. “If we were.”

Castiel studies him, his eyes moving over the shape of his mouth, the green-penny rust of his eyes, the glimpse afforded of the hollow of his throat by his open collar. He knows that Dean uses flirtation as a distraction technique all the time – it pisses him off to no end. Today, however, he thinks he could do with being distracted. He thinks of the three days he has left with Dean and, recklessly, he thinks that just for once, just for a while, Baker Company and the rest of the 116th can go fuck itself.

He doesn't move in closer. He just drops his voice, soft and low, forcing Dean to lean in closer, and he says, matter-of-fact, “Winchester, if we were having a moment, you'd know it.”

Dean raises his eyebrows. “Is that so, sir?”

“And as it happens...” Castiel takes a deep breath, and he says, “I do have some free time this afternoon before we move out. Between eighteen-hundred and nineteen-thirty, if you're interested in – knowing it.”

Understanding flickers through Dean's face. “Yeah. I'm interested.”

“Eighteen hundred?”

“Sure.”

“You're not--?”

“I'll delegate.”

“Same place as last time,” Castiel says. “Is that acceptable?”

Dean pulls a face, as though considering whether to argue, but Castiel can see the tilt of his smile and he knows he's just being a pain in the ass. Castiel raises his eyebrows, daring him to try it, and Dean relents. “Sure thing,” he says. “That's acceptable. I'll be the one in ODs.”

Castiel almost laughs. For the sake of not furthering Dean's ego, he doesn't let himself smile until he walks away.

Baker and the rest of the 2nd Battalion are moving out again tonight for Gut Hasenfeld, and word is that if they are unsuccessful again, they may be pulled off the front-line and into reserve. Castiel isn't sure how to feel about that. It will be the first time that any unit he is a part of has been withdrawn due to failure to attain an objective.

Rationally, he understands that this is on the entirety of the 116th, not

on him, and that the most sensible thing to do would be to play it safe tomorrow, to keep his men's heads down and wait for the order to retreat. On the other hand, if every CO in the United States Army played it safe so that any difficult position could be somebody else's problem tomorrow, they would never have even made it into Normandy. He supposes pride plays no small part in it as well; Castiel is not a man who takes kindly to the idea of giving up.

There wasn't time yesterday to implement Virgil's new assault strategy before it was time to go – there was too much that needed to be rearranged, too many positions that had to be swapped, too much coordinating with Able's movements – but today there is time. Tonight, they can do it.

Castiel finds Naomi and gets him up to speed on the new intelligence, sketching in enemy positions and drawing potential courses of action. The request for support that Castiel placed yesterday comes through from a Battalion runner – approved. No aerial bombardement – the Ninth Air Force are needed further south – but the 747th have an anti-aircraft artillery battery that they can lend for the cause, and that, plus the combined forces of Able and Baker's light artillery platoons should definitely lend them enough credence to make some headway.

Castiel moves back and forth between companies, between Battalion CP and the headquarters of the 747th's Charlie Battery, between each of his platoon-leaders to fill in the new plan on their maps. He talks them through it again and again, mapping out the route north to flank left and take Gut Hasenfeld from the direction of the river. He chainsmokes and he forgets to eat lunch and he rubs at his knuckles, flexes his fingers until the joints crack. He talks himself through it until he thinks it might work.

Come eighteen-oh-three, Castiel is frazzled and tired and already wearing thin. He stands in a briefing with Major Campbell that should have ended thirty-three minutes ago, his fingers jittering at his sides with nervous energy. He wants to get this assault over with. He wants to be with Dean.

“--but you need to be prepared for the indisputable fact that moving on Gut Hasenfeld from the north will draw fire from Jülich,” Campbell says, directing their attention to the arcs of fire from Jülich's main strongholds. “We still have no way of frying their communications., but we've got a good shot if we move fast, stay low, and get as close to the objective as possible before they can call in for support.” He lifts his head to glance across the COs. “We're all clear on our new sectors, correct?”

The plan has changed a few times over the course of the day – most critically, it has moved from being a strategy employed across two companies to one being carried out by the entirety of the 2nd Battalion. Nonetheless, Castiel is as confident as he ever feels he can be. “Yes, sir.”

“Able and Baker on the main flanking assault, with their light artillery held back at RVP-1, here. Charlie and Dog on the diversionary assault, Fox laying down a base of fire for them from RVP-2, Golf in reserve.”

Castiel nods. “Yes, sir,” he says in chorus with the rest of the COs.

“Any further questions?”

“No, sir.”

Campbell nods, and straightens up. “That'll be all. I want you formed up and ready to move at twenty-two-hundred hours on the dot. Cain, I want that action report on my desk by twenty-one-hundred at the latest, or I will find someone else to command D Company who can handle their fucking paperwork, is that clear?”

Cain clears his throat. “Yes, sir.”

“You're dimissed.”

Castiel turns and falls out. Usually at this point , he would wait for the other COs and double-check plans with them regarding the assault, but not today – he's late.

He walks away from Battalion CP in long, hurried strides, moving for the low concrete building where he and Dean met last time. It isn't ideal, cluttered with furniture and facing directly onto the street, but it's the only place they won't be disturbed, and since Easy Company moved their harbour area deeper into Koslar in order to be near Battalion CP, it's the closest thing they can get to secluded. It's a five-minute walk, and Castiel tries not to seem as though he is in a hurry, because in his time as commander, he has learned that nothing is more likely to incite interruptions and useless questions from replacements than looking as though you're in a rush.

By the time he gets there, anticipation and frustration are mounting so high that Castiel is breathless, impatient, and he pushes open the door with an unsubtle bang. Dean is sat on a wobbly wooden dining chair, his hands loose between his knees, and he looks up, startled, when Castiel crashes in.

For a moment, they just look at each other, as Castiel pauses to catch his breath, and then Castiel says, “Hello, Dean.”

Dean stands, dusts off his hands on the ass of his combat pants. “Evening, sir,” he says conversationally. “Was beginning to think you fell and bust your hip.”

“Well,” Castiel says. “There's this German position I have to clear

tonight – you might have heard someone mention it--”

“Oh, yeah, I think I heard about that.”

Castiel has nerves fluttering uneasily in his stomach, but they are settled now: Dean smiles.

Castiel shuts the door behind him.

He crosses to Dean in four steps. He grabs the collar of Dean's combat jacket in both hands and walks backwards to pull Dean, half-stumbling, after him, until Castiel's ass hits something hard – a table, a cabinet, he doesn't give a shit – and Dean keeps coming, momentum nearly toppling Castiel backwards over it. He ends up half-sprawled with Dean between his thighs, and he gets a hand up into Dean's hair. He drags Dean's face down towards him and kisses him hard.

They undress hurriedly in stops and starts – Dean's musette bag and jacket shrugged off to hit the floor behind him as Castiel unclips his helmet, and then they kiss; Castiel's own helmet, his rifle and his webbing, tossed aside, and they kiss again, Dean licking into Castiel's open mouth; Dean pushing open Castiel's jacket, fumbling with the button and zipper of his pants, while Castiel jerks Dean's shirt up under his armpits. Dean reels back a step to hook his thumb into the back of his collar and yank the shirt over his head, and then he comes straight back in, his mouth hot and urgent on Castiel's.

Dean leans heavily into him, and Castiel is caught up in the long lines of his body, the solidity of his stomach and chest, the breadth of his shoulders, the cut of his hipbones that Castiel can feel on the insides of his thighs. Castiel pushes his hands up Dean's sides as he pushes his tongue into Dean's mouth, skims fingertips over ribs as he sucks and bites. A low, breathy noise snags in Dean's mouth, and then he shoves Castiel's jacket down over his arms to pool on the top of the cabinet,

sweeps aside his suspenders, and works at Castiel's pants.

It's awkward to get the pants off – Castiel lifting his ass to shimmy them down his thighs, pressing his face into Dean's chest as he reaches past him for his own feet, tugging out his bloused hems, and clumsily trying to kick free of the fabric. He's only partially successful, and increasingly frustrated, until at last Dean laughs and takes pity on him.

“Okay, come here,” Dean says, shaking his head, and he steps back to unlace Castiel's boots. His fingers are quick and deft, loosening the laces, and Castiel watches with a slow half-smile. Dean glances up to see him, and he breaks out in a grin. “Yeah, this is the hottest part.”

Castiel hums with exaggerated approval, and he raises his eyebrows. “Oh, Dean,” he says, dead-pan, “I'm wild for you.”

Dean laughs. “Yeah, yeah, hold your horses.”

“Horses being held.”

Truthfully, Castiel doesn't mind. There is Dean, freckled bare-chested, cut up with pale, dusty twilight where it spills through the cracks in the boarded-up window; there is the light of his smile as he makes a theatrically Herculean effort to pull off Castiel's boot. He can be a pain in the neck and a total fucking meatball, but Christ, Castiel is so in love with him that he feels it like a ache in his chest, something warm and soft and hopeless.

After Dean has slid off the second boot and dropped it to thump heavily against the floorboards, he cups Castiel's ankle in his hand, fingers flexing, and Castiel is about to ask what he's doing when Dean lifts Castiel's ankle level with his shoulder and Castiel is tipped

abruptly backwards to lean back on his hands.

“Dean, what--”

Castiel's words trail off as Dean peels off his combat pants, tosses them carelessly aside, and then he hooks one of Castiel's legs over the bend of his elbow. He leans in close – in the process pulling Castiel's leg higher, and tilting him like a fulcrum until he falls back to prop himself up on his elbows – and Dean's mouth curves up into a lopsided smile. Voice low, he says, “You got that present handy?”

Castiel swallows. “Combat jacket. Right breast.”

Dean reaches past him, digging through Castiel's jacket until he comes up triumphant. He tosses it up in the air, catches it neatly in the same hand, and gives Castiel a smile. Castiel doesn't smile back; his heart is beating like a drum. He is breathing shallowly, nerves fluttering in his stomach.

Arm still curled under Castiel's knee, Dean tips forwards to kiss Castiel, his mouth slow and careful, the press of his tongue almost shy, and he fumbles one-handed to get the jelly open. Castiel pushes himself to sit more upright, leaning back on his hands instead of on his elbows, and he catches Dean's mouth, captures his bottom lip and scrapes his teeth over it. Dean lets out a soft sigh, and then he sets down the tube on the side of the cabinet and his fingers, slick with cold jelly, play over the inside of Castiel's thighs, find their way down behind his balls to rub over his hole.

Dean's finger pushes in easy, cold and slippery, to the first knuckle, and Castiel's breath catches. He realises, now, how uncomfortable this usually is, only noticing the discomfort of the chafe and burn that he forced himself to get used to, now that it's no longer there. He lifts one hand to curl around the back of Dean's neck, the other propped out

behind him on the cabinet-top, and he tilts his hips into the blunt touch of Dean's finger.

His head tips back, pulling in one deep breath after another as Dean steadily fucks a finger into him, and then Dean leans forwards to kiss along the line of Castiel's throat. He sucks lightly at his Adam's apple, scrapes his teeth over his collarbone, drags his lips up to mouth at the hinge of his jaw, and Castiel feels slow heat curling around his spine. He's only half-hard, now, but he can feel his cock thickening against his thigh as Dean works.

A shiver traces itself over Castiel's skin as he feels the wet press of Dean's tongue over his pulse-point, and his fingers tighten on the back of Dean's neck, a low noise falling from his open mouth. Dean doesn't touch Castiel's cock – and it's a good thing that he doesn't, because Castiel already feels lit up from the inside with the slow shift of Dean's hand, the pressure and the stretch snagging the air from his lungs as Dean pushes a second finger in. Castiel says, “Fuck”, his voice strangled, and Dean sighs against Castiel's throat, his breath warm and damp, and Castiel can feel the tension in his shoulders.

Castiel keeps one hand behind him on the cabinet to keep himself upright, but he slides the other down from Dean's neck, over his chest to thumb at his nipple, and Dean's mouth opens against Castiel's jaw, all his breath coming in a burst. His hips rock forwards, the head of his cock butting against the back of Castiel's thigh, leaving a smear of pre-come on Castiel's skin.

“Cas,” he says, and doesn't get much further than that: “Cas – Cas--”

“Yeah,” Castiel says, rolling Dean's nipple under his thumb so that he makes a low, struggling noise in his throat, something desperate, and Dean tilts his forehead against Castiel's shoulder, breathing ragged. He pushes two fingers into Castiel, steady and slow, and his hips move faintly with the rhythm like he's fucking him properly. It sears new heat all through Castiel's body, his every nerve-ending fizzing, and

he's hard now, breathlessly rolling his hips down to fuck himself on Dean's fingers. He wants desperately for Dean to touch him, wants his hand or his mouth, anything. “Come on,” he mutters, nails scratching down lightly over Dean's chest, fingers playing over Dean's nipple. “Yeah – fuck--”

Dean uncurls a third finger, and Castiel's voice gives out as he loses all the air in his lungs. He gasps out, back arching, and he tips his head backwards as he struggles to breathe, because Dean's fingers are thick and rough and they shift inside him to set off a dull pressure in Castiel, a hot pulse like the need to piss except that it ignites like a flash-fire in his blood and lifts a grunt in his throat. It's gone in an instant, but Castiel wants it again.

He slides his hand up over Dean's chest, along the curve of his neck, to push his fingers up backwards through Dean's hair, and he pulls Dean forwards into a kiss, tongues slick and hot. He bites at his mouth, sucks at his lower lip, and he rocks his hips into Dean's hand, but it isn't enough. He wants more. He wants Dean's cock, wants to be fucked so hard he forgets how to speak; he wants Dean to break him apart and put him back together again; he wants Dean to own him; he wants to be his. He's greedy for it, hands pulling at Dean's hair, at his bicep, at his hips – trying to get him to work faster, opening Castiel up ready for it.

“Come on, come on,” Castiel says impatiently, and he can hear already that his voice is fucked, hoarse. He fits his hand to Dean's cock, and he starts to jerk him tight and fast, and Dean groans. He surges forwards to kiss him hard, and in doing so, Castiel's thigh hooked over Dean's arm is suddenly pulled up higher than he was anticipating. A short, desperate noise breaks out of Castiel's throat as he finds the angle and pressure of Dean's fingers all new, sparking electricity under his skin.

Dean's fingers stutter inside Castiel, losing pace, and his hips move unsteadily to fuck into Castiel's fist. His open mouth is wet and shining, and when he looks up from watching his cock pushing into Castiel's hand, and he meets Castiel's eyes, he looks wrecked already. His cheeks are flushed, his hair unevenly dishevelled, and his

expression is something all at once desperate and hopelessly soft. His hand flexes on Castiel's thigh where his arm is hooked under Castiel's knee, and his fingers curl inside him so that Castiel's breath bursts hotly out of him all at once.

Breathlessly, Castiel says, “I want you to fuck me.”

Dean exhales, shaky. “Yeah,” he says, voice rough. “Yeah, I can – yeah.”

“Now,” Castiel clarifies. “Right now, I want you to--”

Dean nods wildly, his chest heaving.

“Let me up.” Castiel touches Dean's hip, and then settles both hands behind him on the cabinet to push himself fully upright as Dean pulls his fingers out. Castiel feels the loss of them, achingly empty and unsatisfied, but it's only for a moment. He settles his hands on Dean's waist briefly, pulling him into a kiss that is slow and as reassuring as it is wanting; their noses bump, and against his mouth, Castiel can feel the faint curve of Dean's smile. Then he pushes Dean away from the cabinet, climbs down – feeling thoroughly undignified, in his shirt and socks and nothing else, with his cock bobbing in front of him – and turns around.

Behind him, Dean palms one hand over Castiel's hip, over his waist. He reaches for the abandoned tube of surgical jelly on the side of the cabinet. He is quiet for a moment, and Castiel can't see what he's doing, but he can hear the soft, wet sounds as Dean slicks up his fingers, jerks himself slowly; he can hear Dean's breath catch as he hastily touches himself.

Castiel braces both hands on the top of the cabinet, and he breathes.

He tries not to relive the last eight months of wanting this nearly every time he looked at Dean; he tries not to think of watching Dean dance in Plymouth, watching the confident rock of his hips and imagining.

Then Dean says, “Okay,” and he has a hand between Castiel's thighs – first nudging at his legs, easing them apart, then fingertips playing over his hole. Castiel wants to push back onto his fingers, fuck himself on Dean's hand, but he swallows and tries to be patient. He settles his weight more comfortably onto his hands where he holds onto the cabinet, and then there is the touch of the head of Dean's cock, wet and cold with lubricant.

There is an element of that same painful pressure as last time when there was no give, but Castiel can feel that this time, it is working. His grip tightens on the wood until his knuckles whiten.

Dean's hands settle on Castiel's waist, his thumbs digging into the back of his hip. Castiel pushes back the way he remembers from his teenage years, the first few times he fingered himself, when the touch was still alien and strange. He sets his teeth into his bottom lip, and he closes his eyes, tries to relax. He tilts his hips forwards, ass lifting, and he leans further over the cabinet, and then, slowly, Dean pushes inside.

Castiel's breath is cut off with a abrupt, strangled noise.

“Fuck,” Dean gasps. His fingers have tightened to bruising on Castiel's waist. “Jesus – okay. Are you okay?”

Castiel's mouth is hanging open, and he can't find the words to even begin to respond. Every nerve in his body feels fine-tuned to the sensation of Dean's cock, the stretch and sting and burn of his muscles, the feeling that he can't breathe around the aching fullness of it. It fucking hurts, tears stinging instinctively at the backs of his eyes, his

nose prickling. His hands are tight on the cabinet, his knuckles starkly white through the skin.

“Cas?” Dean's voice is edging towards worry now. “Cas, you gotta answer me, you gotta--”

“I--” Castiel starts hoarsely, and his voice cuts out. He takes a slow, shuddering breath, and tries again: “I'm fine. Just – give me a second.”

“Yeah, yeah. I can – yeah, just.” Dean exhales. “Whatever you need.” He leans over him, a weight settling on Castiel's back, and he tilts his forehead against the back of Castiel's neck. Castiel can feel the damp warmth of Dean's breath against his skin, and then Dean kisses him – between his shoulder-blades, at the juncture of neck and shoulder, over the knot of angry scar tissue that his D-Day shrapnel injury left behind. His movement shifts his cock inside Castiel, and the pain starts up anew, but softer now, more like a flicker than a burst.

Castiel closes his eyes and breathes through his teeth, and he tries to relax into Dean's touch, the skate of hands down his sides, over his ribs and his stomach, the fingers rubbing slow reassurance into his arms. Castiel breathes, and he pushes slowly back the rest of the way onto Dean's cock. Behind him, he hears Dean's breath snag; he can feel the tension in Dean's stomach where he is tilted over Castiel's back.

Dean's hands move, slow, over Castiel's skin – rolling over Castiel's nipple, grazing over his sides and waist, thumbing at the spur of his hipbone, scratching his nails bluntly through the arrow of coarse hair away from his bellybutton, then lower still, to brush teasing fingers over the length of Castiel's cock where discomfort has him softening. It feels good; Castiel's lips part to let out a slow sigh as Dean's fingers play over the head of his cock, and instinctively, he rocks a little into the touch. Something changes, where Dean's cock pushes into him – the angle, or some kind of pressure, but Castiel hears a low stutter of noise rise in his throat. The burning stretch around Dean's cock still hurts, but there is a dark flicker of heat in his belly, and he wants to

stoke that fire.

Castiel takes a deep breath. “Dean,” he says, his voice already rough. “You can--”

“You sure? Are we good?” Dean sounds worried; he also sounds stretched thin, and Castiel can feel him trembling, restraint coiled tight and ready to snap. “Can I--”

“Yeah, just – slowly.” Castiel drops his head down, focuses on breathing steady. “Do it. Come on.”

Dean shifts back, his hips tilting away so that his cock pulls out, and Castiel hisses out a sharp breath between his teeth at the strangeness, the rough, wet slide. He rolls his shoulders back, and there's an emptiness now that he wants filled. He wants Dean back. He opens his mouth to say as much, something to the effect of *hurry up and fuck me,* but before he can speak, Dean fucks forwards into him – not hard, but steady, decisive, and it punches the air out of his lungs.

He can't quite think straight. Part of his brain is aware only of the sharp ache of it, the burn of his muscles, how he should ask Dean to stop – the rest of him is all caught up in the heat building in his gut. Everything Castiel has ever felt, every time he has pushed his own fingers inside himself, or he has fucked down onto Dean's fingers, is nothing compared to this. He wants more.

Words fail Castiel; he manages, “Yeah – yeah, keep--” and then Dean fucks into him, slow but forceful. It pushes Castiel forwards until his thighs hit the edge of the cabinet, and one of his hands slides across the wood. Heat snaps through him. Castiel means to say, *fuck,* but it comes out strangled and wordless, a sound of incoherent want. He pushes back to meet Dean's next thrust and tears another low, involuntary sound from his mouth.

“Fuck, Cas – Jesus, you--” Dean's words are disorganised and broken; his voice is low and rough in his chest, and Castiel can hear him breathing heavy, and then he fucks forwards into Castiel hard.

Castiel's hands slide again, leaving him unsteady and wobbling, and then Dean tilts forwards again, settling a solid weight on his lower back, and Dean reaches across to lay his hand over the back of Castiel's, fingers lacing together.

His head is spinning; it's dizzying. This is something so beyond what he had considered possible that it had never even occurred to him. Fingers tangled together, a reassuring hand on his hip, thumb rubbing circles on his skin. Kisses to the back of his neck, his shoulder-blades, the tip of Dean's nose bumping through Castiel's hair. Someone who genuinely wants him. He is breathless with it.

It still hurts, but Castiel barely notices anymore. Dean presses a wet, open-mouthed kiss to the back of Castiel's neck, scrapes his teeth over the skin, and then he is sucking a bruise to the slope of Castiel's shoulder, a thing that aches and stings and has Castiel shivering against him. His mouth falls open on a soft noise of wanting, and he presses back into Dean's cock until he feels him bottom out and they are pressed flush.

He can feel the line of Dean's hipbones where they dig into his ass, and Dean's hands are still dragging up over Castiel's body, his fingers painting poems on his ribs and stomach. Castiel's cock is thickening against his thigh again, heat tightening low in his abdomen until he is left breathing rough with a noise of want vibrating low in his throat every time Dean pushes hard into him.

Castiel rolls his hips back into Dean's next thrust, and behind him, he hears Dean's breath catch, hears him make a breathless noise, and his hips stutter, pace faltering. Castiel pushes back against him again,

grits out, “Fuck, Dean – keep going, don't st--” and then Dean fucks forwards into him hard enough that Castiel's arms buckle.

His elbows hit the cabinet hard and he gasps out loud – half in pain, and half because the movement has changed the angle at which Dean pushes into him, and somehow everything is different now, and there is a keen pressure inside him that he can feel in his stomach, dull and sparking. It coils heat tight around the base of his spine, and his back arches, his head tipping forwards as his breath snags in his throat.

“Shit, Cas,” Dean says, and his hands tighten reflexively on Castiel's hips. “Are you--”

“I'm okay,” Castiel starts, even as he can feel the sting in his elbows of future bruises slowly blossoming, but it's hard to care when Dean is hot and thick inside him, when he rocks his hips back and hears Dean make a ragged noise like he's barely holding himself together. “I'm good, I'm – fuck, Dean--”

“Yeah,” Dean says, and he leans forwards again to drag his mouth wetly over the back of Castiel's neck. “Yeah--”

Castiel wants Dean like this, wants every part of him, and suddenly this isn't enough. Dean fucks into him, steady, pushing Castiel hard into the cabinet, and Castiel can hear the uneven sound of Dean's breathing, the hot press of his mouth, but he can't see him coming apart, and he wants it. “I want to see you,” he gasps, even as Dean's cock sets off another burst of intense heat that leaves his knees wobbling, and with a great effort, he braces both hands against the cabinet to push himself up. “I want to – Dean--”

Dean's hands clutch at Castiel's hips, at his waist. “Cas, are you--”

“I want to see you,” Castiel says again, and he reaches behind his back to push at Dean's stomach and urge him back. He pulls away, letting his cock slip out – a short breathless noise rising in his throat as he does, and shivering at the uncomfortable loss of it – and then he turns around to rest a hand on Dean's chest. “I want to see you, I--”

Pulling back, Dean looks at him, and Castiel has only a moment to take it in – the flush up from Dean's jaw and ears, the pink swell of his open mouth, his hair dishevelled, the heat in his eyes as his gaze drops to Castiel's lips – and then Dean holds Castiel's face in two hands, and pulls him into a heated kiss. Castiel turns him around, presses him into the cabinet, and then he gets his hands on Dean's hips to shove his pants down past his thighs. He settles both palms flat to Dean's chest and he pushes him down.

Dean drops heavily to his knees. Castiel uses his hands, resting on Dean's shoulders now, to nudge him backwards, and as Dean settles to sit on the floor, his back to the cabinet, Castiel grabs a handful of the hem of his own shirt and twists it up over his head. He tosses it aside.

Castiel moves across to Dean in only his grubby army-issue socks, joining him in three short steps, and he drops down to kneel beside him. He swings a leg over Dean, his knees bracketing Dean's hips, and he cups both hands around Dean's neck, and he kisses him. Dean's mouth is all slow heat, the slide of his tongue, the scrape of his teeth. He gets his hands under Castiel's naked thighs, easing his legs apart where he kneels over Dean.

There is a moment where they stop, Dean fumbling for the tube of jelly and slicking himself up again, and then slowly Castiel lowers himself to sit in Dean's lap. At first, there is that pressure and pain as the head of Dean's cock presses at his hole, Castiel holding his breath, and then Dean pushes home. This time, the stretch and ache isn't so painful, and Castiel's head falls back on a long sigh.

Dean kisses along the line of his throat, and for a long few seconds,

neither of them move; Castiel just breathes through the heat as Dean kisses the underside of Castiel's jaw, drags wet lips and hot tongue curling over the flutter of Castiel's pulse, scrapes his teeth over his collarbone, sucks at the hollow of his throat. Then, slowly, Castiel rolls his hips back against Dean.

“Fuck,” Dean groans, his mouth wet against Castiel's throat. “Oh, fuck – fuck, do that – yeah, keep--”

Castiel braces one hand on side of the cabinet, over Dean's head, and his other hand goes to Dean's shoulder, and he rocks back onto Dean's cock again, slow and careful. Then again. It punches the air from his lungs, that white-hot flashfire igniting as a heavy pulse in his stomach again, and at the same time, Dean lets out a short, breathless sound. He lifts his hips into Castiel, and Castiel's mouth falls open on a moan. His hand slides up from Dean's shoulder to clutch at the back of his neck, to rake his fingers through his hair, and he pushes his forehead against Dean as he rolls his hips back and back and fucks himself on Dean's cock.

Gasping for air, Castiel's mouth is slackly open as Dean pushes into him, and he's so hard it hurts, his blood beating so loudly in his ears that he can barely focus. He doesn't notice the pain anymore. All he knows is that he doesn't want to stop. The thickness of Dean's cock is a sweet burn Castiel never wants to give up, and there is that pressure that is no longer so much a momentary bolt of heat as much as it is a constant building need, rising into his throat until he thinks he can't breathe through it. He can hear that his every inhale is turning into a low, shaky noise, and he rolls his hips back into Dean, greedy for more.

Dean's hands skate up over Castiel's sides, drag over his chest to thumb at his nipples, and Castiel isn't crazy for it the way that Dean is, but it still lifts a broken moan in his throat and he snaps his hips back hard.

“Fuck,” Dean says, voice wrecked, and his hands come to Castiel's face, holding his jaw into two hands, and he kisses him open-mouthed and urgent. Castiel licks into his mouth, sucks at his lower lip, and he grinds down onto Dean's cock, and then Dean gets a hand in the space between them. He curls his fingers around Castiel's cock, rubbing his thumb under the head, and Castiel can't hold back the noise he makes at that, something low and filthy.

They are no longer kissing but breathing each other's air. Castiel presses his face to Dean's and he pants against the corner of his mouth, wanting to kiss him but barely able to breathe through the heat as he fucks back onto Dean's cock and forwards into Dean's loose fist, and he feels more than he hears the words tumbling past his lips, tripping all over each other and becoming tangled in a half-coherent ramble of *yeah, yeah, fuck, like that, right fucking there, fuck, yes.*

Dean fucks him slowly, but hard, Castiel's breath cut off with every thrust, and distantly Castiel thinks that this is going to hurt later, but it's difficult to to care when every nerve in his body is electrified with need. He slams his hand back against the cabinet, fingers tightening on the wood, clings on tight to the back of Dean's neck, and when he rocks his hips back hard against Dean, Dean bursts out with, “Fuck, Cas – fuck,” and his voice is wrecked, strained and urgent.

“Yeah, yeah, I'm here--” Castiel gasps, barely even conscious of what he's saying as Dean fucks into him hard and steady. His brain is spinning, and everything in him is focused on the aching stretch around Dean's cock, the dull pressure that Dean hits and hits, igniting fresh fierce heat at the base of his spine until he can barely breathe around it. He rolls his hips up into Dean's hand, slams himself back down onto his cock, and he can't think of anything else except that he's close and he loves Dean and he loves this and he's so fucking close now that it almost hurts and he wants to come so badly.

He kisses Dean, sloppy and inelegant, his mouth wet and desperate, and he curls his fingers tight into his hair, and his mouth is open on a stream of *fuck, fuck, yeah, like that, keep going, right there,* and he doesn't know what else – desperate and shattered, every part of him

broken open with it. He tips his head backwards, back arching, and he breathes in ragged gasps for air, as he fucks himself back onto Dean's cock and runs his mouth with, *yeah, yeah, fuck, Dean, fuck, that's good, like that.*

“Cas--” Dean rasps, and his name in Dean's mouth, rough and breathless and wanted, sounds perfect. Dean kisses over Castiel's pulse-point, teeth at the hinge of his jaw, and then he just presses his face into his throat and breathes, shaky and unsteady, as he fucks into him, tightens his fingers under the head of Castiel's cock each time he pulls his hand back up. “Jesus, Cas, I – you sure you're – you're okay, you--”

“Fuck, it's – yeah, it's perfect,” Castiel gasps out, his brain half-coherent, words spilling out over his lips without thinking. “Yeah – fucking – love it, I love – Dean, I love you – I love--”

Castiel's brain catches up with him a split-second late, and his mouth falls open – fuck – and Dean's pace stutters – fuck, *fuck* – and he panics. He jerks backwards, his hands pulling up close to his chest, and then, just when he thinks that everything is going to fall apart and thinks, with desperation, of how to back away from this, Dean surges forwards to kiss him hard.

Dean doesn't speak, but Castiel can feel him – trembling. The press of his mouth is firm, unflinching, unmoving, and then he pulls back just far enough to gulp for air, the sound of his breathing wet and shaky, and he kisses Castiel open-mouthed. Castiel still has his hands uselessly caught between them, and Dean gets a hand fisted into his hair, a hand tight on his waist, and he hauls him in close until their every inch is pressed flush, chest to hips. Dean kisses him, and he doesn't speak, and everything in Castiel rushes hot with a wave of shaky gratitude.

Then Dean pulls his feet forwards, knees lifting, and it tilts Castiel further forwards against Dean's chest, and he sinks back slowly on

Dean's cock with a stuttering sigh. Dean's mouth goes slack against Castiel's as he breathes, and Castiel pushes their foreheads together as he rocks his hips back into Dean's cock. Castiel cradles his jaw reverently in two hands as he lifts himself and sinks back down, fucking himself on Dean's cock. Dean is shaky as he moves to meet him, hips rocking up into him, and he pants into the open space between their mouths, and his gaze is on Castiel's lips, and then he meets Castiel's eyes, and Castiel is trembling and unsteady and so fucking in love with him.

Gradually, the pace of Dean's hips is faltering – he fucks up into Castiel in incremental movements, and then he loses rhythm altogether, and Castiel can see him – Dean is coming apart.

There is sweat gleaming along the column of his throat, his open mouth gasping, shoulders shaking, and his fingers tighten reflexively on Castiel's thighs near to the point of pain. He has gone quiet now; he's close. His mouth is open, lips red and swollen, and fuck, Castiel wants to kiss him so badly. He drags Dean's head down, colliding in a kiss that is messy and inelegant and all slow, filthy heat, the slick of their tongues and the scrape of their teeth. The angle isn't quiet right now, and Dean doesn't have a hand on his cock anymore, so the heat in Castiel's belly loses some of its urgency, but he doesn't care.

Castiel has said it once; he wants to go on saying it. He stays silent, but he cups Dean's jaw in his hands and he loves him, and he pushes his hips back to meet Dean's every juddering, unsteady thrust and he loves him, and Dean's eyes flick up to meet Castiel's. His gaze is hopelessly soft, wanting, and Castiel doesn't have the voice to say anything. He kisses him, deep and warm and slow, their faces crushed so close together that their noses rub side-by-side, and Dean is breathing ragged, gulping for air.

“Cas, I'm--” Dean manages, his voice shrapnelled, and his chest is heaving. “You gotta – I'm close, I'm gonna – Cas--”

“It's okay,” Castiel says, and he kisses him. He says it against his mouth: “It's okay, I'm here, it's okay, I've got you--” He rolls his hips back against Dean, slow and steady, and his hands drift gently over Dean's chest, his collarbone, his shoulders and throat, the side of his face to brush his thumb over the shape of his lower lip, and he kisses him. Dean tenses, his breath catching, and he presses his open mouth against Castiel's cheek, and he comes.

Castiel feels it as it happens, the sensation of Dean's cock pulsing inside him strange and new, but he doesn't have the space in his head to care. He sits there, with Dean pressed close and sweaty against him, and he scratches his fingers gently through the back of Dean's hair, his thumb rubbing slow circles behind his ear.

Dean's breathing is unsteady, still shaky, and he turns his head to press his face into Castiel's throat. “Fuck,” he says, his voice strangled. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to – I was gonna--”

“It's okay,” Castiel says, and he lifts his arms to curl around Dean's shoulders. He settles one hand between Dean's shoulder-blades, the other on the nape of his neck, and he kisses what he can reach of the top of Dean's head, his hair in prickly disarray. “Dean, it's fine.”

Dean swallows. He lets out a long, slow breath. “Fuck,” he says, nosing into Castiel's collarbone. He sounds scratched raw. “I'm sorry, man. Okay. You're--”

“I'm fine. Dean – Dean.” Castiel gently pushes him away, far enough for him to look him in the eye. At first, Dean avoids the eye contact, staring down determinedly at Castiel's shoulder as he breathes heavily and comes down, but then Castiel sweeps Dean's hair back from his forehead and kisses him gently, and when he pulls back, Dean's eyes lift to meet Castiel's. “Honestly – more than fine,” Castiel adds, and his mouth pulls up into a small smile.

Dean looks at him, and slowly, he relaxes. He is still coming down, breathing roughly, but there is the uncertain start of a smile on his lips, and he tries to laugh. “In my defense,” he says, “I think I did pretty well, considering. We had this a long time coming – and you, a goddamn dreamboat, so--”

Castiel rolls his eyes. He can feel mud and blood and grease in his hair, on his skin, and he has uneven scarring on one side of his face, and it's been too long since he shaved. “Shut up,” he says, and he lifts himself onto his knees to let Dean pull out. The loss of him is strange, everything slick and warm and almost unpleasant, but Castiel doesn't mind too much, because he can already feel a slow ache building in his thighs and ass. He can cope with pacing himself.

With his hands sliding up from Castiel's thighs to rest on his hips, Dean tilts forwards to catch his mouth in a slow kiss. His breath is still laboured, but he presses in close, their noses crushed together, and he exhales against Castiel's mouth, warm, with a soft sound of wanting caught at the back of it. Dean's mouth opens, hot and slow, to capture Castiel's bottom lip, to curl his tongue over Castiel's, and one of his hands slips back over Castiel's hips, over his ass, and lower.

Before Dean can get anywhere, Castiel catches his hand and holds him still, fingers sweeping soft over the inside of his wrist. Truthfully, he thinks his ass has had all it can handle for one day.

“Okay,” Dean says, and his tongue darts out to wet his lips. He moves as though to push Castiel down onto his back, and adds, “Do you want me to--”

“Stay,” Castiel says, and he has both hands on Dean's arms, not with enough force to pin him, but enough to get the message across – *stop moving*. He wants Dean to stop trying to give him what he thinks he wants. “Just stay,” he says, and he kisses him.

Dean palms over Castiel's cock, pulling a short sigh from Castiel's lungs, and then he fits his hand to jack him properly, fingers gentle and slow. Castiel sits in Dean's lap, his arms loose around his neck, and he rests his forehead against Dean's temple, breathing slowly through the slow-starting heat that simmers low in his belly. He closes his eyes, his lips parted, and he immerses himself in it, letting all his focus narrow down to the touch of Dean's hand, the solidity of him between Castiel's thighs, the way Castiel can feel him breathing.

Castiel isn't quite hard, the urgency gone from him, but there is a tight ache in his balls and a stretch in his ass that hurts when he moves, and it doesn't take him long to get back up to speed.

Dean's hand tightens on the upstroke, his knuckles bumping the underside of the head, and Castiel makes a soft, low noise in his throat. His arms tighten around Dean's neck, his fingertips pressing into his shoulder-blade, and he pushes his hips forwards into Dean's touch, in slow, shallow pulses. Castiel opens his mouth, breathing rough, and he mutters, “Yeah, that's – yeah, fuck, like that--” and he grinds forwards into Dean's hand.

He's been close to coming for so long that within minutes he's almost there, heat curling at the base of his spine, and he can hear himself starting to gasp, his every breath a short burst of sound, of wanting. He slides one hand up from Dean's back to push through his hair, and he holds him close. Castiel can feel it between them – the unspoken agreement not to discuss what Castiel said, and what it means – and he is trying hard not to think about it, but it's difficult when his entire body is pressed against Dean's, when he is rocking his hips in an unsteady, stuttering pace into Dean's hand, when Dean kisses him breathless.

“I got you,” Dean says, his voice hoarse, and he has his free hand on Castiel's hip, hauling him closer. “I got you, come on, Cas, come on--”

His hand twists under the head of Castiel's cock, his thumb slipping

over the head, and Castiel's back arches through a sharp spike of heat that has him groaning out loud before he can stop himself, and fuck, he's close. He's really fucking close, and he can barely breathe through it, and he can hear low, breathy noises spilling out over his mouth and he can't stop. He's clinging desperately to Dean as he fucks into his fist, faster now, without rhythm now, because he doesn't care about anything except how badly he needs to come.

It tightens in his stomach and there is a whine in the back of his throat and he can hear himself rambling again, *fuck, that's good, that's good, Dean, fuck, fuck*-- and he tries to kiss Dean but he is just gasping against his mouth, shaking, and Dean says, “I got you, it's okay, I'm here,” and his fingers tighten and Castiel comes. It hits him so hard that he doesn't make any noise; his breath is cut off, his mouth falling silently open.

When Castiel opens his eyes and remembers how to breathe, he finds Dean's face scrunched up, somewhere between a laugh and a flinch. There is come all over his stomach and chest; he has a particularly offensive splatter on his collarbone.

Castiel's eyes widen. “Sorry,” he says, and he is still breathing ragged and coming down, but he isn't so dazed that he can't reach out two fingers to carefully wipe Dean's throat clean.

Dean pulls a face, and he looks down at his own body. “Don't worry about it,” he says, nose wrinkling, but then he looks up through his eyelashes to meet Castiel's eyes, and with an expression that is equal parts smug and guilty, he goes on, “Me, I'll just wipe it off. You, on the other hand--”

Fuck. Castiel had forgotten about that. He tips his head back, and he takes a deep breath. “Goddamnit,” he says. There is a sharp ache in his thighs and ass that he is only starting to become aware of as he settles from the high, and now that Dean mentions it, there is a distinctly unpleasant sensation of slippery wetness at the crack of his

ass, a combination of come and surgical jelly that Castiel doesn't want to consider too closely. He shakes his head. “It's fine.”

Dean's mouth twists sheepishly and he tucks the corner of his bottom lip behind his teeth. “You might change your mind there, when you're dealing with that during our next assault.”

“We'll see,” Castiel says, even as he thinks, *shit.* He hadn't considered that. At that moment, though, with Dean warm and solid and smiling underneath him, his hipbones gently digging into Castiel's thighs, his hair fucked up beyond repair, it's difficult to give a fuck. Just for now, he doesn't want to think about combat, or command, or Baker, or the men who are going to die tomorrow when they push for Gut Hasenfeld again. Castiel reaches for him, smoothes a hand over the uneven stubble of his jaw. “But – it was worth it, so.” He hesitates. He wants to say more, but he isn't good at this. He swallows, and tries: “You – you were... worth it.”

Castiel isn't prepared for the extent to which Dean's expression softens at that, his mouth tilting into a tiny, lopsided smile, his eyes warm. He leans, only just, into the touch of Castiel's hand. “Sir,” he says, his voice gently teasing. “You trying to be sweet on me? You feeling okay?”

“Forget it,” Castiel says, but he is looking at the light on Dean's face, the curve of his smile, and he can feel his own mouth tilting up in echo. “You're an ass.”

“I just don't want you to hurt yourself, that's all,” Dean carries on, his grin widening.

Exasperated, Castiel drops his forehead heavily against Dean's. He closes his eyes.

They need to get cleaned up and dressed, Castiel knows that. He has already been gone too long, and each minute further that he stays here with Dean heightens the possibility that someone is going to come looking for him. His hand slips away from Dean's face, slides slow down over his chest. He breathes Dean in – sweat and antiseptic, D-rations and coffee.

For a long moment, Castiel can pretend that this is all there is. The quiet and the stillness. The rise and fall of Dean's breathing beneath him. Their faces pressed close together. Dean's hands on his skin.

“Hey, Cas?”

Castiel doesn't open his eyes. “Hm?”

Faintly, through the other side of the hush, Castiel can hear voices, a scout car rumbling, distant artillery-fire. He is pretending that he can hang onto this.

Then there is Dean's voice, soft and hesitant. “How many hours?”

Heart sinking from throat to floor, Castiel opens his eyes. “I--” he starts, and then gets no further. He thinks he might have been about to say that it doesn't matter, that it isn't important – neither of which are true. He checks his watch, counting on the hour-hand. His voice is heavy when he says, “Seventy-one hours. And we're moving out at twenty-two-hundred.”

When Dean sighs, deflating, Castiel feels it beneath his hands.

Castiel says, “We should make a move,” and he hates himself for it.

“Yeah,” Dean says, hollow. “Sure.”

Castiel doesn't move. After a few seconds, Dean lifts his head to meet his eyes, and they look at each other in silence and in solace.

Castiel drops his gaze to his hand, sweeping slow over Dean's chest. He trails his fingers across his abdomen, his stomach, ineffectually wiping away splashes of come in distraction, and he says, “Could you do me a favour?”

“Name it.”

Castiel swallows. “You get back here once you're done in Belgium.” He knows he's being naïve. He hears his own voice in his head, snapping at Dean not to be ridiculous, that the very idea is hopeless. He doesn't care.

Dean nods. “Yes, sir.”

“You save your Battalion commander's life, or you do someone five hundred favours,” Castiel says, and he doesn't look at Dean, instead focusing on his own fingers as he wipes Dean's chest clean, “or you get into somebody's good books, you make yourself invaluable to somebody important, I don't care – but you get yourself transferred back afterwards. You come back to me.”

Dean hesitates. “And if I can't?”

Castiel looks at him.

“If I can't find a way back,” Dean says. “Then what?”

His voice is quiet, and Castiel hears the truth of what Dean is saying – not just considering what will happen if they can't get transferred back into the same unit, but what happens if they don't both make it out. If this is all they get and one of them doesn't come back at all.

“I'll find you after,” Castiel says.

“Yeah.” Dean nods. He takes a deep, slow breath, and he says, “You come down to Lawrence – meet Sam and Jessica.They'll love you, I know they will.”

“I could write in advance,” Castiel says. “If you have a spare room, I could--”

Dean scoffs. “Cas,” he interrupts. “You're not gonna sleep in the goddamn spare room.”

Speechless, Castiel can only look at him, and fuck, he has been trying so hard not to think about it, and here he is, blindsided – the two of them, tangled together in a real bed with springs and bedsheets; the hazy weight of the early morning sunlight unfolding about them; the sky beyond the windowpane clear and blue and still; Dean's hand curled loosely with his own. It feels like a shard of glass in his throat.

Castiel doesn't say anything, and Dean leans back away from him. “What--” he says, “you'd be happy with that? Staying in the spare room, pretending--”

It still surprises Castiel, sometimes, that Dean forgets just how long Castiel has been pretending – how good he is at it. It's almost laughable. “Dean, I'd be happy in the house next door,” he says. “At the far end of the road – anywhere. If I get to be near you, Stateside, in peace-time, I'll take it if I have to sleep in a box in the fucking street.” He pauses to take a deep breath, his eyes flickering anxiously away from Dean's. “If you'll have me.”

“Cas--”

Castiel looks away. “I just – don't want to make you have to choose.” He pushes himself off Dean, and climbs inelegantly to his feet.

A frown creases Dean's brow, his mouth thinning. “I'm not gonna have to choose,” he says. “Sam would never do that.”

Castiel stands up too quickly, putting too much faith in the strength of his legs, and there is a moment where his knees buckle and are unable to support him. The only thing that keeps him from staggering into falling straight back down is a hand on the cabinet behind Dean's head. “Fuck,” he mutters, exhaling in a burst. Then, as he braces himself and straightens up properly, he becomes objectively aware of the discomfort all through the entire lower half of his body: his aching knees, the burn of his thigh muscles, and – fucking Jesus – his ass. He steadies himself against the cabinet, blinking, startled.

“Hey.” There is Dean's hand, steadying, on his hip. Dean picks himself up gingerly, hoisting his pants up from where they are tangled around his ankles as he goes, and he settles two hands on Castiel – one on his waist, one on his shoulder. He is holding him upright. “You okay there?”

“I'm fine,” Castiel says, defiant of his still shaky knees. He doesn't say that he doesn't trust himself to move, or that everything hurts. “Fuck. Do you have anything we can clean up with?”

Dean bends to retrieve his combat jacket from the floor. He digs through pockets until he comes up with a grubby rag, which he lifts to his face and tentatively sniffs before he deems it acceptable enough to be used. He scrubs himself down first, half-turning out of modesty when he comes to wipe down his dick, and then he tosses it to Castiel, who catches it easily.

Castiel wipes himself down and, once finished, he balls up the filthy rag and drops it indiscriminately onto the floor. He pulls on his underwear and his combat pants, and he doesn't look at Dean, and he tries not to imagine what their life could be.

They get dressed, and they don't speak. Castiel shrugs into his shirt, twists into his suspenders, pulls his combat jacket on. He pushes his feet into cold, stiff boots, and he glances at Dean putting the weight back on, but he doesn't say anything. Sometimes Castiel is so used to the size and shape of Dean in his combats that he thinks of Dean, stripped down to skin, as being smaller than he expects. Today, Dean zips up his jacket, and it looks as though he is drowning in it.

Castiel sits on the floor to lace his boots tight and blouse his pants into them. He stays seated as he reaches for his M1, passing the sling over his head and adjusting its weight to hang comfortably. The metal and wood is cold to the touch, comfortless. For a moment, he doesn't move, sat with his M1 in his hands and his legs pulled up in front of him, unable to summon the energy to become Captain Novak again, and then there is a hand in front of him.

Dean tilts his head over. “Come on.” He waves his hand closer to Castiel.

Castiel grabs his arm, fingers curled around his wrist. Dean pulls him to his feet.

There are a long few seconds where Castiel holds onto Dean. His fingers brush slowly over the inside of Dean's wrist, tracing patterns on his skin. He doesn't want to let go.

Dean says, “Cas, listen to me. Sam isn't gonna make me choose.”

Castiel pulls his hand from Dean's. “But if you tell him, you're already choosing,” he says quietly. He knows that Dean is new to this, to hiding and pretending and keeping his head down, but Christ, sometimes it frustrates Castiel beyond words. He doesn't know how to explain this so that Dean understands. “If Sam reacts poorly, you can't untell him. Even if you turned me away and said you never wanted to see me again and married a woman--” Castiel can feel something thickening, hot and choking and bitter in his throat, and he can taste the way it sharpens the words coming out of his mouth. “Sam will always know that you're--”

“That I'm what?” Dean challenges.

Castiel's heart is heavy, aching like an old bruise. “Sick.”

The line of Dean's jaw tightens, a muscle pulsing at the hinge. “I'm not sick,” he says stubbornly. “You, either.”

This is worse than if Dean had just been oblivious. Dean knowing the consequences and not caring – it tightens something in Castiel's chest until he feels he can't breathe around it. He wonders if he will ever get used to Dean's faith leaving him breathless. He stoops to retrieve his helmet. He says, “Sam may not see it that way.”

Dean looks at him.

Castiel says, “My mother didn't.”

Something changes in Dean's expression. He straightens slightly, his eyes widening, and Castiel can see him re-evaluating. Dean shouldn't need a lesson in the way that people look at you differently once they know; he's doing it right now. His mouth softens. The look in his eyes turns first confused, then darkens with slow understanding.

Dean looks crushed small, and he doesn't say anything. Maybe he is waiting for Castiel to elaborate. Castiel doesn't. He isn't in the mood to explain the lying letters home from basic training – that he was better now, that he'd met a nice girl on furlough – and how it didn't change anything. There are some things he guards closely, and the way his mother would never quite look at him afterwards is one of them.

At last, Dean says, “I'm sorry.”

Castiel has only ever said this to one other person. When he went to find Inias, the first words out of his mouth, however well-meaning, were *how did this happen? Were you not being careful?* Dean is different. It doesn't make him feel better, exactly, but for once, Castiel is not the one to blame, and that isn't nothing.

“I just don't want to be responsible for you making the wrong choice,” Castiel says. “I am not worth you losing everything.”

Dean doesn't disagree, and Castiel is grateful for it. He knows that nothing will ever be more important to Dean than Sam is, and if Dean had tried to argue differently, Castiel isn't sure he would've trusted

him. There are thin scratches of light that filter through the boarded window, and they pick out the line of Dean's jaw, the tired darkness beneath his eyes.

Dean takes a long, slow breath. He rubs a hand down over his face. “Then we'll figure it out,” he says, and he looks at Castiel. “We'll improvise, I don't know. Make it up as we go. You just--” He swallows, takes a step in towards Castiel. “You just get your ass there, and we'll figure it out.”

“Of course,” Castiel says instantly. “Lawrence. I'll meet you there.”

Dean says, “You better.”

He takes Castiel's helmet out of his hands, sets it carefully on his head. He pushes Castiel's hair – growing out too long, again – behind the head-band, tucks it behind his ears, out of the way, and his fingers are steady and gentle. His mouth tilts up lopsidely at one corner; his face softens. Under the dirt and smoke grit, his freckles are fading with the lessening light. He bumps his knuckle under Castiel's jaw. He fastens his helmet.

Chapter 18: An Der Ruhr

Chapter Notes

> Warning for behaviour that can be seen as self-harming maybe? Deliberately making an injury more painful as a coping mechanism, anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

8th December, 1944

Dear Sam,

Well, I got some bad news. I'm getting transferred. I've been putting off telling you for a couple days – I think maybe I thought if I didn't tell you then it wasn't true. I don't know what my new unit's gonna be, so you won't be able to answer this latest letter until I write and tell you where I am. But it won't be the 29th Infantry anymore, that's for sure. Apparently I'm moving south, a little closer to Belgium. I guess things are going badly down there.

Sammy, I don't wanna go. I can't say this stuff to anybody here, you know, I gotta be the one holding everybody else together, so if I start complaining I'm pretty sure the whole damn thing will fall apart, but – I don't want to go. I like the guys here. I know I bitched and moaned when I got moved from the 104th and I know just what you're gonna say – 'you settled in fine with the 29th, you'll settle in fine wherever' but that's not the point. I don't want to keep settling in. I want to stick around with Joe and Charlie and Ed and Kevin and Don and Adam. I want to keep pissing off Sgt Masters and poking at Sorento and none of this means jack to you, I guess, but. I want to stay under Novak. He-- [redacted] He's a [redacted] real good commander. I know we butt heads a lot and we had some rough disagreements but he's taken good care of me and the rest of Baker and I've been taking care of him and of Baker too. And if I leave Baker – I mean. I don't think I'm gonna get to come back. And I don't know if everybody's still gonna be around when this whole thing is over, and if Baker loses one of my guys while I'm not there, I'm gonna lose it. If Baker loses Novak and I'm not there--

Yeah, it's fine. Everything's fine. It's gonna be okay, Sam. Don't worry. Everything is gonna be okay, I'm just wondering – I'm sorry, this is nuts, I know, but I'm just wondering – if I was [redacted] if I did something terrible, something really, really bad and I couldn't come back from it. Would you be okay? With me, I mean. Would you be okay with me. If I was fucked up real bad. If I was sick and I couldn't get better. You'd still – you wouldn't throw me out. You'd stay with me. Nothing's wrong, by the way. I'm just wondering. Just thought I would ask, no reason.

Anyway, I'll write as soon as I know where I'm going and I'll let you know how my new unit is. You take care of yourself till then, and take care of Jessica. Bitch.

T-4 Sergeant Winchester

91W1O, Company B, 116th Infantry Regiment

29th Infantry Division

United States Army

8th December, 1944

The time to move comes cold and quiet, with dimly silver moonlight sifting through the winter-thin branches overhead, glinting off what windowpanes remain in Koslar unshattered. Castiel left Dean with little more than an hour to prepare his men before they move out for Gut Hasenfeld, but now the evening is ticking slowly closer to twenty-two-hundred. Much of Baker Company is formed up standing easy and waiting, their hands in the smalls of their backs, weapons loaded, webbing bulging with ammunition, and they speak quietly to their neighbours in the lull.

“--you never know,” Tran is saying to Corporal Doe. “Maybe Mr. Hitler's on a special visit to Jülich. Maybe we push over the river and take the city, and he just happens to be there, and he--”

“Kevin,” Doe says flatly. “You really think Hitler's gonna be on the front-line?”

“Well, he could be. On a vacation, or something.”

“Yeah, he could be. How many times you seen Ike on the front-line?”

“Once.”

“Yeah. That's what I thought. Once, so--”

Castiel walks the length of the front rank and then away to supervise his platoon-leaders and NCOs where they organise their equipment and run through last-minute checks. He shakes back his sleeve and tilts his wrist so that the face of his watch catches the moonlight and picks out the crooked shape of twenty-one-fifty-three. Soon Castiel will need to get the last of Baker formed up on parade.

He looks back over his shoulder, down the street, to see if there is any sign of Battalion commanders approaching, but as of yet there are only company COs, runners, and non-coms scattered across the tarmac. He smoothes a hand over the strap of his webbing, and then someone clears their throat somewhere to his eight o'clock, and there is someone striding past on his far side, and Dean says, “You alright, captain?”

Castiel lifts his head. “Fine, thank you.”

“Huh.” Dean turns, scuffing one boot through the mud underfoot. He considers him, exaggeratedly thoughtful. “You look a little, uh – stiff. Is all.” In the thin white light afforded when the clouds break, the tilt

of his smile is small and secretive. “You getting enough sleep, sir?”

Castiel gives him a withering look. “Perfectly well-rested, actually.”

Dean cocks his eyebrows. “That so?”

Truth be told, Castiel's thighs are burning. He even has an ache in his stomach muscles, and his ass is almost too uncomfortable for words – but he'll never admit as much to Dean. He says, “Muscle cramp, maybe.”

Dean's smirk spreads into a grin; he bites at the corner of his mouth to try and fight it back. “That's too bad, sir. You gotta remember to warm up before you do any, uh – exercise.”

“Go fuck yourself, Winchester,” Castiel says mildly.

Dean laughs. He mouths, silent: *you wish.*

Castiel wishes he had a witty response for that, but he doesn't. He can still feel the stretch of Dean, the burn of him, and if he moves the wrong way, a fresh ache prickles up through his thighs to bring it all instantly back to him – the clutch of his hands, the rock of his hips, the pushing, steady heat of him, his tongue in Castiel's mouth. All that Castiel can do is narrow his eyes at Dean, but there is no real anger in it.

Dean's smile stretches wider. Even as Castiel tries to channel his exasperation with Dean into a frown or a clever retort, he can feel his mouth tilt up into a smile in echo. “What do you want, Winchester?” he asks.

Dean shrugs lazily. “Just wondering if you wanted to talk through where me and the other medics are gonna go when we move out.”

Castiel sighs. “Of course,” he says. “Three-platoon, for you. Du Mort with two- and Fitzgerald with one-platoon. We shouldn't need anyone with four- as they'll be covering us from the rear.”

“Yes, sir,” Dean says with a nod.

Castiel runs a hand backwards over the top of his helmet. The metal is coldly slick with misting rain, droplets condensing on the rim of the helmet to drip onto his shoulders. “You know,” he says, “once in a while, I'd like to have just one conversation which isn't about fucking Baker Company.”

That smirk makes a reappearance, Dean's mouth turning smug. “You want to talk about fucking Dog Company? 'Cause, you know, I've heard Corporal Simmon's real good with his hands.”

It's the worst joke Castiel has heard in some time, and it makes him laugh. He shakes his head.

“I'm just surprised you even know how to talk about anything but Baker, sir.”

Castiel squints at him. “I do have a life outside the company. I had fun, once.”

“You're the least fun person I know,” Dean says, but his mouth is still

curved into a smile, and his eyes are warm, soft, as they move over Castiel's face, taking him in.

Tipping his head over to one side, Castiel considers this. “I told a joke in 1938,” he says. “It was received well.”

Dean snorts derisively. “Okay, I've heard your jokes, and I'm calling bullshit on that.”

Castiel raises his eyebrows in a pretence of offense. “At least I have more than three in my arsenal.”

Dean's grin widens. “So why did the scarecrow get promoted?”

“Please, excuse me,” Castiel says, and moves as though to leave. “I have an appointment to shoot myself.”

Dean bursts out with a laugh and he catches Castiel's elbow, holds him still. “Hey – hey. Come on now.” His grip pulls Castiel back a step so that when he turns back, there are only inches between them. It seems to take Dean slightly by surprise; he leans back to put more space between their faces, and his eyes flick cautiously sideways to survey their surroundings – the men moving urgently all around them, the crates of ammunition being unpacked, M1 clips being tossed among those who need them, weapons' cleaning kits being passed back and forth.

Castiel doesn't bother glancing away to see if anyone is watching them, as Dean does. Castiel gets three more days with him, and so Castiel looks at the soft curve of his lower lip, at the thickly ridged scar down from his hairline, at the almost-straight line of his nose where he should be freckled under all the grime. They are a moment of stillness as the rest of the Battalion swirls and storms around them,

and Castiel wants so badly to kiss him that he feels it as an ache in his chest.

Slowly, Dean's hand falls away from Castiel's elbow.

“Get ready to move,” Castiel tells him, straightening as he speaks and lifting his chin, scraping himself back into command. “Five minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Check noiseproofing amongst the replacements – nothing rattles, nothing shines.” Castiel hesitates. “And--” He reaches a hand across the space between them, and through the dark, unseen, he touches gentle fingers to Dean's hip. He says nothing else.

Dean lowers hand to thread his fingers quietly through Castiel's, knuckles to knuckles. His skin is rough with dirt and camouflage cream, his palm broad and calloused. “Yes, sir,” Dean says softly.

Dean squeezes his hand and lets go. Castiel takes a step back.

With a clearing of his throat, Dean hoists his musette bag higher on his shoulder. “Permission to be dismissed, captain?”

For a second, it sticks in Castiel's throat. He wants to tell Dean to stay. “Granted.”

Dean turns and walks away into the dark, soon lost but for the crunching of his footsteps over the frosted cobbles. Castiel follows,

striding back towards where the rest of Baker is getting formed up – passing Private Amriel as he goes, who raises a hand in greeting and says, “How's it going, captain?” before doing a double-take and audibly saying to another private, behind Castiel's back, *you ever seen him smile before?* – but Castiel doesn't have time to think about it.

On parade, there is some last-minute shuffling – Harvelle has been moved to act as three-platoon's platoon-sergeant to give some semblance of authority now that they are without a commanding officer; Milligan and Etheridge have been swapped to support Harvelle, and Virgil is working with a platoon-sergeant in the form of Garrigan now. However, when Castiel comes to stand in front of them, hands in the small of his back, for the most part the fidgeting stills. Private Chapman is still struggling with the straps of his webbing, aided by Zeddmore; Dean, Hanscum, and Private Gilbert crane their necks to speak in an undertone to First Sergeant Masters, who tucks a bundle of mail into the pocket of his combat jacket and shakes his head at them.

Castiel checks his watch. Twenty-one-fifty-seven.

He dresses down the men who come filtering in now – *you're late, what the hell have you been doing, when I say we'll be moving at twenty-two-hundred that means you need to be on parade and ready for orders by twenty-nine-fifty-five at the very latest, you need to get formed up immediately and you had better hope that you're combat-ready* – and he waits, and he checks his watch, and he waits, and then when, finally, Major Campbell comes into view, Castiel barks out the order for his men to come to attention.

Major Campbell, it turns out, doesn't have much to say in the way of advice or encouragement – not that he ever does. He simply checks that Castiel knows his orders and then tells him to move out. Castiel doesn't need to be told twice.

As one, Baker turns on its heel and marches out north for Gut

Hasenfeld. They reach RVP-1 with the rest of the 2nd Battalion before they diverge, and then they push up, fast and unfaltering, moving along the lines that they have discussed and memorised and rehearsed in their minds a hundred times. Four-platoon falls back with Able's own light artillery platoon to set up a base of fire from five-hundred yards; the rest of Baker pushes on ahead in staggered file, feet crunching dully through frost-encrusted mud, their breath curling whitely in front of their faces. In the distance, Castiel can faintly see the shifting silhouettes of the remainder of the 2nd Battalion as they disappear into the night.

RVP-2 is set up at the edge of a field, the infinitesimal swell of soil that divides one crop and another the closest thing that they have to cover. Platoon by platoon and squad by squad, Baker drops down onto their bellies in the mud and settles in to wait. Castiel kneels in their midst and gives his orders in silence, his hands moving quickly – *one-platoon, there, two-platoon, reserve, there, three-platoon, there, radio on me.*

With a scuffling of sound as combats and webbing chafe over each other, Boniadi comes forwards with his radio mouth-piece in hand. Castiel sets a hand to Boniadi's shoulder, presents him with a flattened palm: *wait.*

They surrender themselves to darkness and to silence now. In the near distance, Castiel can see the solid, unyielding shape of Gut Hasenfeld, the farm buildings rising, square and strong, out of the shadows. The tension in his back registers as a dull, pulsing ache that moves from his bad shoulder to elbow and back again. His fingers shift on his M1.

Seconds scrape by into minutes; Castiel peers at his watch, hiding his flashlight under the cover of his combat jacket, and watches as fifteen turns to twenty and then to thirty-five. Then, finally, the radio crackles, and Boniadi becomes still, and then he pulls the earpiece of the radio away from his head, leans across into Castiel's space and he whispers, “Charlie, Dog, and Fox in position, ready to move.”

Castiel says, “Copy that.”

He signals for platoon-leaders, directs them with quick, sharp gestures to their respective positions, ready to advance; he has Boniadi contact Able to confirm that they are prepared to move; he breathes. Boniaid comes back with an affirmative from Able and the news that Charlie and Dog are moving. Castiel looks out across the field and he can't see anything, but he'll know when they make contact. He can hear his platoon-leaders moving up and down the line, whispering, *make ready, prepare to move, make ready, prepare to--*

Up ahead, there is a loud bang, a flash of fire, and someone is screaming. Yells of orders rise influently from the field, and the Germans open fire.

Baker get to their feet and they move.

Castiel runs with three-platoon, keeping towards their tail so as not to make himself obvious; he pulls his rifle up his chest to keep it from clanking and he pushes himself fast, keeps low and breathes slow through his teeth.

He is not so naïve as to think that there will be no minefield in this sector, but if they keep to their spacings and follow proven route, they can minimalise damage. Castiel follows after Zeddmore, veering left when he does, running steady and quiet along the forgotten causeway at the edge of Able's sector. He can see lines of shifting silhouettes in the dark – one- and two-platoon towards his three o'clock, with Able towards his nine, similarly divided. There is tension ratcheting tighter and tighter within Castiel's chest, but he doesn't give it room to breathe. He keeps moving.

Towards the diversionary assault, the night is lit up with muzzle flash and fire, rounds cracking hotly through the air, and then there is the

first hollow boom of the German 88mm being fired. Castiel swallows, eyes moving through the sky as though he can trace its unseen, whistling trajectory, and then it explodes to sear a white flash on the backs of his eyes. Someone screams, high and panicked, like a child. Even from three-hundred yards, Castiel can hear the cry for a medic.

They make it within three-hundred yards when the first mine goes off.

It detonates in a hot white burst that illuminates the battlefield like a fork of lightning, and as the casualty comes crashing back down, broken, they let out an echoing scream, and Castiel knows that he and his men only have seconds. One – he yells out, *keep moving, keep moving,* even as the frantic call for a medic goes up – two – and he pushes himself faster into a sprint that he can feel screaming in the muscles of his aching thighs, the discomfort pressing at his gait with the temptation of how much less painful it would be if he let himself walk, if he let himself limp – three –

Gunfire thunders out from the gunner position dug into the wall, from the barricaded windows at the concrete farm buildings behind. It cuts through Westall's chest and arm, punches him back to the hit the dirt with a dull crunch, and then the S-mine under the small of his back ignites.

Castiel yells, “Take cover--” but it's too late for Westall, and it's too late for the twist of shrapnel that slices through Chapman's cheek and jaw, and it's too late for the next two people, further down the line, to take rounds to the gut. There are men, like Castiel, who make the decision not to take cover – men who decide they'd rather take their chances with the gunners than risk a faceful of S-mine. They drop to one knee, or stay standing with heads ducked and legs bent, and they return fire.

Baker tilts on its axis, staggered file flattening into an extended line, spreading into a thinly spaced wall that moves, slowly, unsteadily, forwards towards Gut Hasenfeld.

As they press forwards, Castiel gives out orders via Boniadi's radio – squads alternating bounds and suppressive fire, company-wide pepper-pot manoeuvre, four-platoon open fire on German gunner position at three-hundred yards, mortars and smoke prepared to switch fire upon Castiel's command – and they keep moving.

“Move up, move up,” Castiel shouts, and he drops his head down as gunfire snaps out all around them. Durrant is punched back by a round through the throat; Schroeder's elbow is shattered and he falls back into the mud with a strangled cry of pain. Castiel twists at the waist, shouts *medic, we need a medic up here*-- as he and Corporal Sorento rush for Schroeder where he screams and writhes, kicking up mud, and then there is a muted, hollow noise within the earth, and Castiel's gut wrenches, and the S-mine launches itself into the air. It shatters Sorento's knee, and Castiel is already reeling frantically backwards – instinct tells him to throw himself to the ground but Jesus, it's a fucking minefield – and all he can do is drop into a crouch and curl himself tightly in on himself as the mine explodes.

When he uncurls himself, he breathes shakily through his nose and he climbs, wobbling, back up onto his feet. He opens his mouth to call again for a medic, but then Du Mort is there, a grubby roll of bandaging in hand.

“Here, sir, I got it,” Du Mort shouts over the deafening chatter of gunfire cutting past all around them.

Castiel nods, and he moves.

He runs as though through a storm – head kept low, one arm up to protect his face behind his elbow, while the German gunners fire and fire – and he sprints to catch up with the rest of his line where their last bound took them twenty yards or so ahead of him. They crouch and kneel and lie flat on their bellies, if they're brave, to provide

suppressive fire for the rest of the company as they press forwards, and then there is a low, stuttering thump from somewhere, unseen, ahead of them. And again.

Castiel's breath catches in his throat.

He swallows down the dread spiking in his stomach and he shouts, “Keep moving,” and then the first mortar hits and it breaks the extended line of two-platoon. Private Lietz is tossed back, weightless, and he hits the ground in a tangle; shrapnel takes off Weber's leg at the shin and bursts through the side of Lattimer's helmet and buries itself deep into Warren's collarbone.

Up ahead, there is another hollow double-thump, and Castiel can only think in panic – what has happened to the diversion? Are Charlie and Dog Company progressing uncontested while Able and Baker take the fall, or is the whole thing going wrong? He knows that this is not going right, but he can't tell how close this is flirting to being a catastrophe.

The shells fall and they fall and the earth around them is exploding, while Castiel drops into a crouch and screams for his radioman – *get Charlie and Dog on the line, tell them to push up while their focus is drawn this way* – because if this is what it looks like and the positions at Gut Hasenfeld are treating Able and Baker as the main assault, rather than pinning down the rest of the 2nd Battalion, then this is the best opportunity they have had so far, and one that they're not likely to get again any time soon.

Castiel is tucked alongside two-platoon's third-squad, Zeddmore and Hewitt and Amriel crouched neatly amongst the mud and metal to fire. Castiel kneels beside them, fumbles in his combat jacket for his binoculars, and he peers out through the darkness and the eye-aching lights of muzzle-flash and mortar-fire. There isn't a great deal that he can do to change orders at this point; Able and Baker are on a wide left flank, while the rest of the 2nd Battalion puts down a suppressive

base of fire, and there aren't exactly a wealth of different ways for two-hundred men to cross an open field.

He tracks their progress against the positions they are moving against to find that one-platoon are being held up by heavy mortar-fire, but that three-platoon and one of Able's primary assault teams are making good progress towards the objective. All they need to do is get close enough to get some defilade from the enemy gunners and then break through. Easy enough.

There is a nauseating roll in Castiel's gut as he looks out over the two-hundred yards to the wall. He swallows it down. With steady hands, he pushes his binoculars back into his jacket.

“Boniadi,” he calls, half-turning. “Get the 747 on the line – see if we can't borrow some of their AAA firepower on those forward gunner positions at the base of the wall. Radio in to Able-six for a status report – potential for Baker-three to spearhead beyond the enemy position and establish RVP-3.”

“Yes, sir.”

Castiel turns back. “Zeddmore, where's your squad-leader?”

Zeddmore lifts his head from the cheekpiece of his rifle. “I'm it, sir.”

Castiel blinks. “What?”

“Sergeant Garrigan got taken out. What do you need?”

Shit. It's not that Castiel doesn't think Zeddmore could be a good combat leader – more that he has never once demonstrated himself to be capable of it. Now, however, Castiel looks past him at the row of hesitant replacements in his squad, and knows that Zeddmore is the best they've got.

“Pepper-pot up to the swell of turf at twenty-five yards – seen?--”

“Seen, sir--”

Another mortar comes screaming over and punches up a thick black column of smoke; Castiel and Zeddmore flinch down instinctively into the mud.

“--and lay down a base of aggressive fire from there. We need to get some heads down or we're not going anywhere.”

For a moment, Zeddmore stares, frozen, at his rifle as though he's never seen it before. Then he takes a deep breath. “Yes, sir.”

Castiel slaps an encouraging hand to Zeddmore's back, and then he rolls to his feet and he moves. He pushes up with three-platoon – one- and two- can handle themselves, with Virgil and Shurley respectively at the heads, but Etheridge has only been a platoon-leader for three days, and he needs all the support he can get. However, most crucially, three-platoon, in spite of its lack of real leadership, is the one in the perfect position to spearhead beyond the Germans' external line of defences. “Etheridge, on me – move them up!”

Castiel orders first squad up twenty yards, second- and third-squad on alternating bounds up towards the small outlying buildings against and inside which they can take cover. If they move fast, they can be clear without taking too many casualties; they'll be past the arcs of fire

of the external machine-gunner positions mounted in the wall and they'll finally have some fucking defilade from which to put pressure on the enemy – and then to Castiel's left, a stray bullet finds its home in Private Blake's thigh, and he chokes out a strangled noise as his leg gives out, and he slumps back against the conrete. Beside him, Corporal Doe shoves his rifle back over his shoulder out of the way and starts to tear at the fabric of Blake's pants, but even from five feet, Castiel can see that it's an arterial bleed.

“Fuck,” Blake's bursts out. “Goddamnit – medic! I need a fucking medic, Jesus--”

Out of nowhere then, there is Dean, breathless, blood-spattered, his smile a brittle, hard-edged thing. He works with scissors and with a darkly-stained hemostat and he says, “There we go, just breathe for me – this is gonna sting a little, but you just gotta breathe and you're gonna be okay--” as he pushes the metal inside the wound, and Blake screams.

Castiel turns back to Etheridge. “You need to move fast – forget suppressive fire, we'll have second-squad on that, you just get to your objective, is that understood?”

Etheridge yells the order down to Harvelle, and Harvelle yells it to the rest of his squad, and three-platoon splits. Castiel sprints forwards, swerves, throws himself down into the dirt alongside Shelly and Tran, and together they pull their rifles up into their shoulders and fire. Over the deafening roar of gunfire and mortars crashing to earth, Castiel yells, “Push up, now, go!”

They run and they run, pushing faster and faster until Castiel thinks he's going to outrun his own feet and fall on his face, gunfire snapping at his heels, and he breathes quick and shallow through his teeth – fuck – and his ankle goes over and he stumbles – *fuck* – but before he can fall, there is someone with a fistful of Castiel's jacket to unceremoniously drag him upright. Harvelle yells, “Go, captain, go,”

and then Castiel hits the wall. No time to slow down: he hits it hard enough to give himself bruises, but he sags gratefully against the concrete.

Castiel tips his head back against the wall and breathes. He steadies his helmet with one hand. “Boniadi, I want smoke down at both corners – call it in to four-platoon,” Castiel shouts over the noise, and he turns his head to find his platoon-sergeants. “Be ready to move as soon as the smoke lands – Harvelle, you flank around this building, see if you can't get enfilading fire on their position; Etheridge, you set up your squad either side of this passage and get their heads down. I'll bring up the rear.”

“Yes, sir,” comes back to him twofold, and then they are away, scrambling low to reach their men and break down orders.

The sky overhead is churning thick with the threat of rain, black smoke twisting into the looming cloud while mortars clap like thunder. Castiel is out of breath as he glances out over the flat expanse of mine-torn farmland ahead of Gut Hasenfeld. All along the line, lit by flickering gunfire, Castiel can see men being hauled, crying, to safety, men struggling in the mud. As he watches, a faceless soldier from one-platoon makes one wrong step, takes a S-mine through the thigh, and then is caught in the delayed explosion that hurtles lethal shards of shrapnel in all directions. One bullet catches Private Sidoli through the shoulder, another through the helmet of one man who slumps at his Browning automatic.

There is two-platoon pressing up for more effective suppressive fire, up and running before they throw themselves back down onto frost-hardened mud – but then, as the shells come roaring over, there is a bullet through Hewitt's chest and stomach, leaving him to crumple backwards to the ground.

“Medic,” Zeddmore yells, racing forwards with his rifle tight into his shoulder, and then the shell strikes just in front of his feet and before

Castiel even has time to flinch, he disappears into a deafening tangle of smoke and fire and metal.

Castiel struggles to breathe. There is little left when the smoke clears – Jesus. They are haemorrhaging numbers fast and Castiel doesn't know how long they can keep this up.

“Boniadi,” Castiel yells. “On me.” As soon as Boniadi comes running, flinching down away from the gunfire, Castiel goes on, not giving him a chance to speak: “Status report from Able?”

“Mostly pinned down, same as we are, sir – their one-platoon can push in to support our three-platoon spearheading.”

From the rear of the line, four-platoon spits mortars and shells, and red smoke uncurls from craters pockmarking the route up to the enemy gunner, twisting brightly against the concrete and bloodless sky. In response, there is the dull double-thump of the German 88, and Castiel presses close against the wall as the whistle builds to a wail to a scream. “Alright,” he calls over the noise. “Get them up here. We'll take the gunner position if they flank to support us with suppressive fire.”

“Roger that.” Boniadi grabs his radio mouth-piece, but then the mortar hits, no more than twenty feet away, smoke rolling thick over them, and it sends a sliver of shrapnel through his forearm. Boniadi jerks back with a short, frantic noise of panic, and already he's bleeding profusely in hot, dark spurts across his combat jacket. “Oh, fuck,” he says, voice wavering. “Captain, I'm – oh, fuck.”

“Hold on, you're alright,” Castiel says, digging in his webbing for what little first-aid provision he has. “Can you still get that message out to Able?”

Shakily, Boniadi nods. He reaches and fumbles one-handed for the mouthpiece as Castiel applies careful pressure to the ragged mess of Boniadi's arm. “Able-six, this is Baker, come in, over--”

Castiel glances away over his shoulder as he works, and he can't fight down the suffocating swell of dread in his throat because three-platoon are pushing ahead towards the enemy, largely unsupported. He can't stay here babysitting his radioman forever. They need to keep moving, or they're going to be torn to shreds. There's a voice in the back of his head, shouting *pull back now, pull back now, you're never going to make it,* but he hasn't had the order from Battalion to retreat, which means he has to keep going.

Castiel yanks the gauze tight enough around Boniadi's arm that it serves as bandaging and tourniquet both, and then he claps a hand to Boniadi's shoulder and he gets up to move. He runs back towards one-platoon, moves them up for a more effective base of fire on the primary enemy position, swings two-platoon around to support three-platoon, calls in to four-platoon to switch mortar-fire and stay the smoke, and then he moves back up to where he can see Able's rifle-platoon crawling unrelentingly up towards the German gunner alongside the fractured squads of three-platoon where they flank and run and fire. He breathes ragged, open-mouthed, as he runs. They can do it. They can do it.

Then, as Baker slowly moves up towards the enemy position, there is a faint shuddering through the air, a change that Castiel feels like a shift in temperature, the slow collecting of storm clouds. It vibrates beneath his skin, and then the soft whistle builds to a whine that pops in Castiel's ears, and then to a roar, and Castiel's stomach drops.

He looks at Harvelle and he doesn't know what to do.

“Fuck,” he whispers, every muscle in his body freezing up with panic,

even as he can hear the cry going up – *take cover, clear the causeway, get into some fucking cover* – because there is no fucking cover and the shell is building now to the scream of a hurricane and there is nothing that they can do now except pull back, but they have pushed so far towards Gut Hasenfeld now that there is no way that they can pull back fast enough to get away from the devastation of the railway gun. He says it again – *fuck* – and then, in a voice that cracks, yells, “Take cov--”

There is Shelly, rifle tucked into his shoulder, one eye carefully held back from the ironsight, and he squeezes out one slow shot that jars the sight against his nose, and he exhales, and on his other side is Gilbert acting as a burst of hellfire, belt of ammunition thrashing and clattering against the ground like a living, angry thing, handled briskly by Peterson, feeding it hand over hand as Gilbert points the muzzle, steadying hand on the tripod, and lets loose, and there is Fontana with his new helmet too big, slipping down over his eyes as he fires, and Doyle past him breathing a restrained stutter of air every time he pulls the trigger.

The shell hits them just past Peterson's steady hands and they are obliterated.

Jerking instinctively back from the roiling black smoke, the shrapnel spray, Castiel's scream for them to get clear dies in his throat. He throws up an arm to protect his face, exhales shakily into his elbow.

He looks over only to assess whether anyone is still breathing – Peterson, choking on the metal in his throat; Gilbert, clutching at the ragged end of his knee in silent, white-faced shock – and then he yells, *medic,* and he tears himself away. His mind is moving at a hundred miles an hour – radio four-platoon, get them to shifts their arcs of fire for more effective fire on the stronghold, get smoke into the pill-boxes, and then call for an orderly retreat, because if people panic and start running before there are any real orders, then before he can do anything, he'll be left behind at the rear of a rout and his entire company will collapse.

He sets off at a sprint across the open space between two buildings, aiming for where he left Boniadi and as he moves, he passes Dean, running for the casualties of the first shell. Their eyes meet for only a split-second as they run in opposite directions, but there is no time to acknowledge each other further. Dean's hands are blood-dark and Castiel is breathing ragged with the effort of controlling the adrenaline surging through his body, and then they are gone.

Castiel crashes into the wall next to Boniadi – white-faced with blood-loss and trembling – as the next shell comes screaming over, shaking the concrete against their backs and blurring out all other noises in a deafening roar. He grabs the radio mouth-piece from him and starts shouting orders for their withdrawal, and then the impact of the railway gun shell jarrs his knees out from under him, kicks up smoke that froths and churns and spills over the ground like a living thing, swallowing whole. It spits shrapnel that takes Chavers' arm off unevenly at the shoulder, punches a raw mess from Corporal Doe's chest and tosses him back into the dirt like he's weightless until the moment he lands and the S-mine beneath his back detonates in a tangled burst. Castiel breathes through his teeth, keeps urgently shouting into the radio – *this is the six, Baker-four heavy fire on established arcs of fire to support withdrawal; Baker-three alternating bounds back towards RVP-2* – and then the orders are out and all they can do is move.

“Pull back,” Castiel yells. “Pull back, everyone pull back now, move!”

Again, the air is ripped in half by the thunderous roar of the railway gun, a shuddering sound that Castiel can feel beating within his skull. It sends him flinching desperately against the wall, and it is only his breath caught, helpless, in his throat that keeps him from bursting out with, *fuck, fuck, fuck, Jesus Christ*-- as it crashes to earth, punching a hole the size of locomotive in the wall of the farm building on the far side. Then the rattle of machine-gun fire starts up again, and as Castiel jerks back, away from the angry crack of rounds off the concrete, he realises that it is not coming from their objective, but from Castiel's four-o'clock.

His head snaps up.

They are being cut off. The Germans are outflanking them and they are being cut off.

“Get everyone out of here,” Castiel yells, yanking his rifle up into his arms as terror spikes in his gut. “Everyone move now, pull back, pull back--”

Man by man, squad by squad, Baker turns tail and runs. The shells are coming down fast and hard now, falling to punch smoke and fire out of the mud, shell after shell exploding and shaking the earth around them, ripping the earth apart. The whole fucking causeway is zeroed, and the Germans are moving to surround them, and Castiel doesn't know what to do except run.

They take alternating bounds, Ansley scrambling, ducked low, out of the gunners' sight-lines, Etheridge yelling for his squad to hurry the fuck up and move, move, move, and the next shell slams like a crack of thunder and explodes in the middle of the causeway and slices a chunk of shrapnel the size of Castiel's hand through Bogic's side, and Tran yells, “I've got him, keep moving,” and hauls him up onto his shoulder. They run, and Castiel shouts to *keep moving, keep fucking moving*, and then Harvelle yelps, gasps, and crumples as a spray of bullets cuts through hip and thigh.

Castiel skids to a halt, kicking up dust, and he twists back to find Dean already sprinting past. Castiel shouts, “Retrieval – Winchester and Ansley, on Harvelle--” and he throws out an arm to the scattered remnants of second-squad running on the far side as they come sprinting past the casualties, and he shouts, “Get some fire down and cover them--” and before the words are out of his throat, there is a bullet through Rabine's jaw and the next shell is screaming over. He pulls his rifle into his shoulder, fires and fires, and he tilts his head

back over his shoulder towards where the rest of Baker are withdrawing, and he yells, “Everyone, pull back – keep going--”

He glances back over towards the enemy in time to see Ansley reach Harvelle's side and promptly take a bullet through the forehead and throat. Dean flinches down out of the way, throwing his body forwards over Harvelle to shelter him, and panic clenches in Castiel's throat. They can't stay here. This is fucking suicide.

“Winchester,” Castiel yells. “Harvelle – Winchester, get the fuck out of there, leave him, we're--”

The sound of his voice is lost in the next explosion. Dust and chunks of rubble come raining down with the next shell, the next after that, and Castiel staggers back a few steps, hands rising automatically to protect his head. He is losing sight of Dean in the smoke. There he is behind the concrete blast of a shell hitting the building beside him, and there he is ducking his head as the bullets crack by. He straightens up, grabbing two handfuls of Harvelle's clothes to move him, but Jesus, they're taking too long.

“Winchester--” Castiel yells, voice hoarse, but before he gets the last syllable out, he sees Dean's left knee get shot out in an uneven dark spray.

Castiel's breath seizes.

Dean lets out a wordless sound, a surreal noise in his throat that sounds more startled than pained – sounds like the noise Dean makes when Castiel kisses his throat, runs his hands down over his sides – and his leg buckles beneath him.

On instinct, Castiel shouts, “Medic--” and then it dies in his throat

because – fuck – *fuck*--

He fumbles with his rifle, pulling it up into his shoulder ready to give covering fire so they can get out of there, but then the next shell hits, and he loses them to the smoke. He can't see them clearly enough to be sure that he isn't going to hit them.

He snaps his aim across left and right, tracking the ironsight through the curling black smoke. Dean hauls himself upright, pale-faced, clutching at Harvelle's clothes, and then he is a silhouette, losing shape.

Blind panic swarms into Castiel's throat and he is only distantly aware of his M1 bouncing hard off hip and thigh, and that is when he realises he is running.

He swerves the impact of a shell that punches a hole in the earth somewhere to his right, and then the next one hits some fifteen feet ahead of him, and he reels back, flinching down with his hands coming up to cover his head. The next is closer, and he staggers back, stops running. He holds himself lower as he hears shrapnel hissing hotly to bury itself in the ground at his feet, and the roar of incoming shells shakes all through his body, screams and screams inside his skull until his ears are ringing. He hauls his rifle up into his arms again, holding it as though being armed can keep the shuddering thunder of the railway gun at bay, but here he is, caught in the open, and rounds are cracking off the concrete beside his head. He recoils away, terror spiking coldly in his gut. He can't stay here. He's going to get fucking shot and Dean is – Dean is--

Castiel lets his rifle drop. “Winchester – fucking move--” Castiel yells, voice cracking, because he doesn't know what else to do except scream – because there is their medic, and no-one else is coming to stitch him up, and his knee is fucked so that he can't complete the retrieval, and the shells are coming down too hard to go back for him.

“Captain Novak!” There's a hand, suddenly, on Castiel's shoulder, jerking him backwards, and there is First Sergeant Masters' face, swimming in the smoke. “Sir, one- and two-platoon are pulled back to RVP-2, ready to move,” he yells over the roar and crash of shells striking, “should we--”

Castiel's mouth opens, and he doesn't get any words out.

The next shell punches a hole in their cover, blowing brick and rubble to drop like hailstones over second-squad, and there is shrapnel twisted through Chavers' throat, another replacement thrashing in the dirt with blood spilling out of his open mouth, and then there is a chatter of machine-gun fire and Masters flinches down out of the way. “Sir,” Masters shouts over the din, the crash and roar, with one arm thrown up protectively towards his head. “We can't stay here - what are your orders?”

Castiel has no idea what to do.

Then there is a crack that Castiel hears whistle right past his head, and Masters is punched lopsidedly backwards, and with a bloody hand pressed to his collarbone, he gasps, “Fuck!”

Distantly, Castiel has brainpower enough to realise that they are aiming for Masters because they think he is the commander. Because Masters is the one with his shit together, while Castiel stands here frozen and nerveless and unable to breathe.

If they stay here, they'll all die. It's that simple. It's the lives of two platoons – some forty-plus men – against the lives of two soldiers, and it should be easy. The maths is simple, and yet here Castiel still is, weighing it up like it's evenly stacked.

He stares out in the smoke and the dust and the whole position shivering with the impact of each shell, and he stares at the space where he last saw Dean – and he thinks maybe if he sees him again, if the smoke clears long enough for him to catch sight of his Red Cross helmet, the solid breadth of his shoulders, then Castiel can justify staying here, risking his whole fucking company for him. The shells crash and they crash and explode and Castiel can barely fucking see anything, and his ears are ringing, and the next scream of metal comes right over his head, making him flinch back into cover, and he has to decide.

"Captain Novak, sir," Masters yells. "We need to--"

Castiel says, "Pull them back." He swallows down whatever else there is rioting in him. "Retreat to RVP-2."

Baker withdraws.

They peel away through the shivering air, hounded by shells that rip the earth apart, spray shrapnel arcing through the air to slice and cleave. Somewhere far behind them, the menacing drum of the railway gun slams and slams and slams until there is wreckage, craters and bloodshed, everywhere Castiel looks. It punches a ragged hole in the smooth pale brick, vomits thick black smoke, and Castiel keeps moving through it with both hands on his rifle. There is no time to stop. There is no time to think.

They flank left, drop back, call in support from four-platoon to rain down 66mms on the German position. Castiel moves with his radioman, calling out coordinates to Battalion – *niner six three* – and mortar directions – *right six hundred, range two hundred* – and Castiel keeps moving. He keeps moving.

Each of the companies of the 2nd Battalion reorg and restructure, and as Castiel moves his rifle companies around for the next assault, he looks over his men, and he almost says, without thinking, “Where is everyone?” before he realises. Most of three-platoon is gone. An entire fucking platoon, cut off and surrounded and left behind.

Castiel has to keep moving. He keeps moving.

They press back towards Gut Hasenfeld again, but they are shattered and staggering and they don't even make it within five-hundred yards before the German gunners start tearing them apart again. Castiel can see, in the distance, the smoking wreckage of the position where the majority of three-platoon were left. It seems untouchable.

By oh-one-hundred hours, Baker is ragged and exhausted, along with the rest of the 2nd Battalion, and over the radio, Major Campbell gives the order for them to pull out of the West Bank and march back to Koslar to be relieved. There is no arguing with the order, and so Castiel walks at the front of his company, leading the ranks home through the smoke and the hissing rain. When they reach the slumping, shell-pocked stone of Koslar, however, he passes over command to Virgil without warning, and he moves immediately in search of the S-3.

He walks fast, his motions tightly restrained, shoulders pulled up high and tense. He walks without looking where he is going, and walks straight past Gabriel, who is wandering between companies with his notebook checking on the men.

“Captain Novak, how are your--” Gabriel starts, his eyes on his clipboard, and Castiel goes straight past him. Gabriel lifts his head, startled. “Captain – Castiel? Cas--”

Castiel barely hears him – his ears are still ringing, a faint, high-

pitched whine that fades and crests and rolls unevenly with his every footstep – and he is detachedly aware that Gabriel is, technically, one of his commanding officers, that this is insubordination. He is aware of it as he is aware of the blood drying on his face and hands: it is tangential to what is important. He moves quickly in long, hurried strides through the tangled chaos of the 2nd Battalion, companies and platoons spilling over into one another as they triage their casualties and count their men and discuss what went wrong, and then Castiel almost crashes into Major Campbell.

Campbell is on the radio. He has a officer from Dog Company on stand-by with his mapcase as he relays some instructions or some report down the line, and Castiel says, “Sir, I--”

Campbell turns his back on him. He speaks into the mouthpiece louder.

“Sir,” Castiel says. “Sir, requesting permission to--”

“--so sorry, sir, one second--” Campbell spins, his face drawn in irritation. “I'm on to the fucking war room, Novak, get out of here.”

“Sir, requesting permission to run another patrol into Gut Hasenfeld,” Castiel says all in a rush, getting the words out as quickly as possible before Campbell can lift the radio mouth-piece to his face again.

“Denied. Now fuck off, get your men squared away, and I'll speak to you later.”

Castiel walks away – he counts ten paces, a respectful distance – and then he waits. After what seems like hours, Campbell hangs up the radio, and he speaks briefly to the officer from Dog, and as soon as the officer tilts his head in a deferential nod, Castiel walks back across to

them.

“Major Campbell,” he starts again, relentless, and he hears his own voice as through a victrola, fuzzy with static. “Requesting permission to--”

“Fucking Christ, Novak. We're moving out at oh-two-hundred – the 115th will be taking on our old position, so there's no need for us to--”

“Requesting permission to run another patrol – just a short one,” Castiel interrupts, and he'll say it again if he has to. He'll say it a hundred times. “Not the whole Battalion, sir – not even my whole company. Just a platoon, or a few squads--”

“Novak, I just pulled five hundred men out of Gut Hasenfeld because they were getting torn to shreds. And you want to go back with a platoon.”

“Sir--”

Campbell cuts over him, his voice withering. “Am I missing some information here? Do you have an artillery battalion up your sleeve that I don't know about? Or perhaps you made a personal call to Eisenhower and he owes you a favour, is that it?”

“No, sir, I just--”

“The answer is no. We're moving out.”

“I had to leave some of my men behind,” Castiel says, and his voice is steady but the words taste like bile in his mouth. “I have to go back for them.”

“If you let me know their coordinates, I'll have the 115th clear through that way to retrieve the bodies.”

“They're not—” Castiel bursts out, and Campbell lifts his head, eyebrows raised, and Castiel breathes, restrains himself. “Sir, they weren't – we were cut off. We just need to--”

“I said no, captain. The 115th can deal with it. If they're out still there, it'll be in their hands.”

“But if we wait for the 115th to move up, it'll be too late. If we move now, our men have a chance. We can get the enemy's heads down, give our men the opportunity to withdraw.”

“Can you guarantee me that you will not incur further casualties on this patrol?”

Castiel's throat tightens. “No, sir, but--”

“Then it isn't worth it. Look around, Novak. The 116th is falling apart. We've lost enough.”

“Sir, I believe it is worth it – I have good men out there. We would be back before we were due to move out and this patrol would in no way interfere with regimental operations, I promise – and I will be held completely liable for any casualties taken on patrol.” Castiel doesn't say what he thinks – that he will be taking a patrol back to Gut

Hasenfeld regardless of whether he has permission or not, but that he would prefer not to be court-martialled for it.

Campbell eyes him, irritated. At last, he says, “One patrol. You run your patrol, but you need all your men on parade and squared away at oh-two-hundred ready to move out. Is that clear?”

Relief melts through Castiel's spine. “Yes, sir. I'll lead them, so it'll just be a quick--”

“No, you're not leading them anywhere,” Campbell interrupts, and he points an accusatory finger. “You're needed here – you don't need to be running rescue missions. You're company commanding officer, for Christ's sake. So act like it. Command your fucking company.”

“Yes, sir.” Castiel snaps to attention, ready to be dismissed, but Campbell, it seems, is not done with him.

“And Novak?” Campbell's voice is hard. “If you're not ready to move out come oh-two-hundred, with your men or without them, I will find someone else to take Baker forwards into Germany. Do I make myself clear?”

Castiel swallows. “Yes, sir. Permission to be--”

“Get out of here.”

Castiel doesn't need to be told twice. He turns on his heel and storms out, and he makes straight for one-platoon. He walks past Cain, with blood splattered across one side of his face and a medic pressing a wad of gauze feverishly to his shoulder; there are nurses from the

Battalion aid-station moving with stretchers and hauling men out of the way for better treatment; on the far side of the street, Gabriel is speaking to Lieutenant Adina, but Castiel walks past them.

He finds Virgil, who approaches with tension in his shoulders and restrained agitation in his voice as he says, “Captain Novak, we started to number off and we're missing at least fourteen men from three-platoon, but it could be--”

Castiel cuts over him. “I need a rifle-team ready to move out on patrol in under five minutes. Who do we have?”

Virgil blinks, startled. “Most of our platoon-sergeants are injured or unaccounted for – we have Milligan, or--”

“Sergeant Milligan,” Castiel calls out across the square, leaving Virgil behind. “I need a patrol back out to RVP-3 to move in the next five minutes. Assemble a team. You can have fifteen – take whoever you need.”

For a moment, Milligan only stares at him, uncomprehending. Then, slowly, he says, “Yes, sir,” and, without questioning it, he turns and he starts calling out for men – Amriel, Horvat, McLellan, Hutton, Tran, Ballard, Hanscum.

Castiel gives them their orders as they prepare to move – patrolling back to RVP-3, clearing through the terrain where three-platoon and Able's one-platoon were cut off, retrieving their missing men. Then he stands there, immobile, as they get ready to march out, moving around him like moths around a light. They drop their extraneous equipment, tighten the straps of their webbing, check their weapons, borrow ammunition from men staying behind. He should be going with them. His fingers flex and tighten on the forestock of his rifle.

Castiel walks through the heart of the preparations and he finds himself in front of Charlie Bradbury before he even entirely understands what he is doing. “Lance Corporal,” he says haltingly.

Bradbury lifts her head. “Sir,” she says, as she realises who it is, and she stops adjusting her webbing pouches, straightens up to face him fully. “How can I help?”

Castiel opens his mouth and nothing comes out. He can't look at her. There is blood cresting up from one side of her jaw and she carries her own loss on her shoulders like she carries her haversack. There is no way for him to say the things he wants to say. He swallows. He battles with himself, and he says, “Could you--” and gets no further.

Quietly, Bradbury says, “Copy that, sir.”

He looks at her. She tilts her chin slightly higher, and she holds his eyes for a second. Castiel gives a curt nod in lieu of saying anything else – he doesn't think he could find the words if he wanted to – and he leaves her to continue organising her webbing. He stands aside with his fingers jittering uncertainly on his rifle until they are ready to move out, and then he lets them go.

For several long minutes, he stands stock-still in the middle of the road, watching the space where the patrol slipped away into the dark. He feels the rest of Koslar move around him, bustle and business, bodies striding purposefully, with urgency, to get the job done.

He thinks, then, that he was arrogant. He already knew before they moved out that the 116th were shortly to be relieved; there was no need for him to throw caution to the wind and push back at Gut Hasenfeld with everything he had. Trying to find some respite from

the dread sitting heavy in his ribcage, he reminds himself that it isn't as though this is all on him – the rest of the Battalion were in on this; they all failed, not just him; this action was approved by the S-3; no-one could have predicted that it would go this wrong. It feels like excuses.

Eventually, Castiel drags himself from the middle of the street and back towards the rest of Baker. He has work to do.

The entirety of the 116th are being pulled back as far as Baesweiler and Alsdorf to make room for the 115th to take over their position; Castiel isn't sure exactly what they are expected to do at the rear of the line when there is plenty of front that still needs holding, but he is sure that General Gerhardt can find them something useful to do. In the mean-time, Baker and the rest of the 2nd Battalion need first to prepare to be pulled back, and for Castiel that means supervising the clearing of their old harbour areas.

In what fractured and scattered numbers they still have, Baker retrieve their haversacks and remaining equipment to haul out into the street, lining up bags on the cobbles in rows according to platoon and squad so that everything can be easily transferred onto the back of a truck. They clean up and clear out, and Castiel delegates – Virgil for supervising the organisation of equipment in preparation to move; Etheridge in checking levels of ammunition; Shurley checking overall equipment status and reporting back as to whether anyone needs anything replaced or repaired; Private Nickerson sent to Battalion as a runner to ask whether Baker will need to keep their ammunition or drop them here for the 115th to pick up; Fitzgerald accounting for casualties; Alistair performing a head-count, squad by squad, to see how many they have lost altogether.

Castiel writes up what intelligence he has, ready to pass on up the ladder to help out whoever is taking over his position; he starts to make rough notes in planning of his action report, but he stalls somewhere around the point where, on paper, he pushes three-platoon up towards Gut Hasenfeld and gets them cut off and surrounded and leaves them behind. He tries to go on writing, but his handwriting –

narrow and spidery and hard to read at the best of times – is loosely formed and more or less illegible, and Castiel realises, then, that his hands are badly shaking. Fuck. *Fuck.*

Hurriedly stowing his pencil and paper away, Castiel decides that he can finish his action report later, but then as he straightens up, he catches sight of Milligan, in the distance, leading a group of ragged men up through the street. Castiel forgets everything. He gets to his feet and he pushes through the sweating pulse of a disorganised crowd of soldiers running last-minute checks.

“Sergeant Milligan,” he calls as he nears them, and he is walking so fast that his thighs burn, a split-second from breaking into a run – but he walks. He walks, and he is calm, and he reaches them and he says, “Milligan, where--” and then he realises that Dean is not with them.

“Sir, we didn't find anything,” Milligan says, and Castiel is only half-listening. On a subconscious level, he is aware of the spray of blood and dirt across Amriel's face, the fact that Tran has his arm slung around Bradbury's shoulder to support him as he walks, blood dripping from his leg, and that Horvath is bleeding heavily from the shoulder, but he doesn't take it in. Milligan is still talking.

“You didn't find anything,” Castiel interrupts, his voice harsh. “No bodies, no dog-tags, which means, sergeant, that they're still out there.”

Amriel and Hanscum exchange a silent look.

“Sir,” Hanscum starts, his voice strained. “There was no point, it was--”

“Let me be the judge of that,” Castiel snaps. “Additionally, I don't

believe that you were asked for your input, Private, so I would thank you to--”

“Sir, it was chaos,” Milligan interrupts. “The whole area is zeroed, we could barely move. We couldn't get anywhere near RVP-3. We had to come back or we would have been--”

“You don't have my men. You don't have any sign of them. So what do you have?”

Past Milligan's shoulder, Amriel looks like he's considering crying. Bradbury's jaw is clenched tight enough to crack.

Milligan says patiently, “Nothing, sir.”

“So they're still fucking out there,” Castiel says sharply, and he's already pulling his rifle up into his shoulder and he's starting to push back, ready to move out and do the job properly. “So the fucking Germans have got them.”

There is the touch of a hesitant hand to Castiel's arm, and when Castiel jerks away, he finds Virgil at his shoulder. “Captain Novak,” Virgil says. He has a radio mouth-piece in his hand. “Major Campbell is on line one awaiting a status update before we move out.”

“I'll find him later,” Castiel dismisses, and starts to turn away.

“Captain Novak – we're due to be formed upon the square ready to move in twenty-one minutes.”

Castiel stops.

“What are your orders?” Virgil says carefully, and Castiel can hear it for what it is – a warning.

“Twenty-one minutes,” Castiel repeats.

Virgil checks his watch. “Well. Twenty now, sir.”

Castiel is working it out. Nine minutes to get to the sector where they were patrolling last night, another nine minutes to get back. That leaves them with two minutes to look for the missing men, and that's assuming that nothing goes wrong – that they aren't shelled or shot at or caught in a minefield.

Campbell's words swim in Castiel's head. If he isn't ready to move on time, he loses Baker. They will move at oh-two-hundred whether Castiel is ready or not, but if Castiel is not ready, then Baker will be given to Virgil, and Castiel – Castiel doesn't know what will happen to him, if he'll be demoted to lieutenant and given his old platoon back; if he'll be moved to command a platoon in another company; if he'll be given an executive role to the rear of the line.

He says, “How ready are Baker to move?”

“We've got the deuce-and-a-halves idling ready – near as I can tell, equipment is set out as was prepared before we moved on Gut Hasenfeld, but men aren't sure what they should be bringing from their combat gear or if we're passing anything over. Platoon-sergeants are on it but I know that one- and four- are receiving contradictory orders and don't know where to pass on information regarding ammunition, so--”

Not ready, then.

Castiel feels impatience spike through him, and in an instant he is ready to snap at Virgil and tell him that it's not complicated – all they need is for all conserved rifle ammunition to be packed into crates to be left with Battalion, with separate crates for 66mm shells and machine-gun rounds, differentiating between Thompson and Browning, and any empty clips and shell casings dumped into musette bags to be passed back to supply officers – and Castiel realises that it is complicated, and they need him supervising, and he still has to take notes on casualties and ammunition, and he has to organise his intelligence to be passed over, and he has to report back to Major Campbell, and he needs Baker formed up and waiting with all of the above ticked off and squared away, and he has twenty minutes.

There isn't time, Castiel realises, and he stands there staring at Virgil as his brain at last catches up to reality. There isn't time for a second patrol.

He turns his head and he finds Bradbury, who stares at him, face pinched and pale, and doesn't say anything.

Virgil says again, “What are your orders, sir?”

Castiel is looking to Bradbury as though for guidance, and Bradbury's expression is unreadable.

Hearing his own voice as though through glass, Castiel says, “Ready the men to move.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ammunition is to be left behind for the 115th. Milligan, take a crate for one- and three-'s rifle ammunition – M1 only. Hanscum, take a crate for any miscellaneous rifle rounds – carbine, Springfield, anything – and collect what you can from three-platoon. Amriel, fill one musette bag with any Thompson wheels, another with Browning belts. If they're empty, find a box somewhere. Battalion should have one that they'll have emptied of rations. Get somebody on four-platoon's shells, split the hollows with the shit that's useful. Virgil, get onto Etheridge, Shurley, and Fitzgerald to check progress with casualties, equipment, ammunition, then report back to me. The rest of you, go through your squad's equipment lines and ensure that your bags are there.”

“Yes, sir.”

Castiel's men turn and move into hurried action, following orders, and Castiel walks away before he can think about what he's doing. He supervises the collection and passing-on of ammunition, and he gets each of his platoon-leaders to do a headcount, to do an equipment count, and he double-checks the numbers with what he has scrawled on a scrap of paper in his combat jacket.

The paper says, *seventy-eight.* From Alistair's mouth, it is *fifty-five.* Castiel is too numb to react. He says, “Thank you.”

They shoulder their haversacks, pick up crates and rough burlap sacks of ammunition, and they pile in their squads and their fire-teams into the waiting deuce-and-a-halves. The trucks idle in the rain, engines dully throbbing, as platoon-sergeants direct their men under tarpaulin. Castiel supervise the loading of the scout cars, and he moves down the line to check in with each of his platoon-leaders – one-platoon, ready to move; two-platoon, ready to move; four-platoon; the broken remnants of three-platoon – and then they are ready to drive out west to Baesweiler.

Castiel heads slowly back towards the truck that he assigned himself. He shrugs his haversack off, twists it around into his arms, and passes it up into the waiting hands of Lieutenant Shurley, who holds the deuce-and-a-half's tarpaulin flap back. Shurley sets the haversack down with a thump behind him, and then reaches out a hand to help Castiel up.

Castiel grabs Shurley's wrist, lets himself be hauled up into the truck. He uses the toe of his boot to push his haversack along in front of the bench until there is room for him to sit, and he drops down heavily. He lets his hands hang loose between his knees. McLellan, at the far end of the flatbed, beats the metal back of the truck's cab to let the driver know that they're all on board, and slowly they rumble away. Castiel lifts the corner of the tarpaulin to look out backwards at the land pulling away – at Koslar, rubble and chaos as the 115th switches in, and at Gut Hasenfeld, smoking palely in the distance.

10th December, 1944

Just after dawn, it begins to snow – small, sprinkling flakes at first, whitely pirouetting, and then more heavily, until it piles thick and heavy onto the churned mud underfoot. Baker are pulled back as far as Baesweiler for hot food, rest, and a movie theatre is even temporarily set up in the dingy cellar of an old bar. Baker are glad for the brief reprieve, and settle quickly into their billeting; they rib each other and jostle for a place in the queue to get hot dogs and ketchup; they write letters home and they smoke and play cards and they gossip about other members of the Battalion. For the first time in months, Castiel lives in relative luxury, and he waits on the 115th for word.

They assaulted Gut Hasenfeld yesterday without the aid of the 116th. Castiel has not yet heard what happened – if they won, if they were defeated, if they were shredded and humiliated as he was – but he thinks, surely, that by this point they will have found--

Castiel feels as though the possibility of Dean being alive somewhere is the single thin thread holding the shards of him together. He can wait on news. He doesn't care how long it takes.

For now, they take up billeting in houses south-west of the front-line and undertake daily training exercises in river crossing – borrowing small metal boats and pontoon bridges from the 121st Combat Engineer Battalion and endlessly struggling across the Broicher Bach stream at Alsdorf, endlessly being snapped at by Battalion officers to be quieter. They are still waiting on warm weather gear and so the men have a particular dread of getting the river crossings wrong in case they fall in. As it is, they scrape their fingers raw and bloody on the metal and on the oars, and spend much of their time in Baesweiler huddled around small hexi-cooker fires, attempting to thaw their blue-tinged hands and ease their chattering teeth.

Otherwise, Castiel does what he does best; he shuts everyone else out and he keeps himself busy.

He reorganises his layout of Baker to account for the fact that he lost the majority of an entire rifle platoon. He comes, slowly, to understand that in moving all his most senior NCOs to three-platoon to support their lack of a leading officer, he is now desperately short on ranked men with real combat experience. He receives word from Battalion that new batches of replacements will be coming in soon, but Castiel is familiar already with the way that works – myriad Privates who barely know the butt of a rifle from the muzzle, Privates First-Class if he's lucky; no technicians, and a maximum of three inexperienced NCOs per replacement delivery. He's more likely to get a Lance Corporal with a great-uncle at West Point than he is to get a Sergeant who knows what he's doing.

Castiel is doing such a good job of keeping himself occupied that he doesn't give much attention to the passage of the days, and so it takes him completely by surprise when, on his way between four- and one-platoon where they are billeted, he is intercepted by Gabriel with a harried expression and a notebook.

“Hi – Castiel,” Gabriel says, relief in his voice and in the relaxing of his shoulders as he approaches. “Just the man I was looking for. I've got a guy from the 112th up at Battalion asking after transfers. Do you have your men ready to move?” Of course – Castiel's seventy-six hours have expired. Wordlessly, Castiel watches as Gabriel flicks through his notebook, scanning page after page of tiny, incomprehensible writing. “I think for you it was a --“

“Sergeant Winchester,” Castiel says, voice hollow.

Gabriel nods, abandoning his notebook. “Yeah. That sounds about right. Do you--”

“He,” Castiel says, and gets no further.

Gabriel looks at him. Even before Castiel says it, realisation moves slowly across his face.

“We lost him. In Gut Hasenfeld.”

“Shit.” Gabriel lets out a rough sigh. He scrubs a hand up the side of his jaw, then over his neck. “Okay. How many medics do you have now?”

“Two.”

“Goddamnit.” Hesitating, Gabriel looks back at his notebook, and Castiel watches him struggle with what to do next. He watches the stressed crease in his brow, the twisting of his mouth. He watches him

beat his pen against the paper. “Alright,” Gabriel says, looking back to Castiel. “I'll radio in and tell them that you can't give them anyone – they'll just have to suck it up and find a medic someplace else. “You alright, kid?”

“Fine,” Castiel says.

Gabriel's eyes move over Castiel's face, unconvinced. “Sorry,” he says, after a second, somewhat awkwardly. “About – Winchester.”

“He wasn't—” Castiel starts. “He's reported missing in action, but he wasn't – he's not--”

Gabriel looks at him. “Right,” he says, soft and warm, and Castiel has heard him use that voice before. It's the voice he uses on replacements saying wistfully that *maybe the war will be over by Christmas,* the shellshocked men with their legs in shrapnel tatters saying, *but I'll be alright, though. I'll still be able to walk, to give my son a piggyback.* Gabriel says, “Sure.”

“I had to leave him behind,” Castiel clarifies. He just needs to make Gabriel understand – Castiel isn't being ridiculous. He was there; he saw it all happen. He remembers, and that is how he knows that everything is going to be alright. “Most of my third-platoon got cut off, so we had to – I've got a few MIA. But the 115th will find them.”

Gabriel is quiet for a moment – a long, painful moment. Then: “Yeah.” He lowers his eyes to his notebook, and spends a long few seconds staring down at the paper, scratching idly under the rim of his helmet with his free hand before he sucks in a deep breath and goes on, “Okay. I better go find my other transfers – I'll see you around. You, uh. Take care of yourself, kid.”

Silently, Castiel nods.

He stands with his hands loose by his sides as Gabriel takes off down the main road in search of the rest of the 2nd Battalion. He watches the narrow, meandering footprints that Gabriel leaves behind in the snow, soon cut up by runners and officers crossing the street every which way to get to their next duties. Already the ground is turning to muddy slush, snow churned darkly underfoot.

Castiel makes himself think about it. He doesn't want to – he wants to shut out what happened, to force it down somewhere dark and quiet and put a lid on it – but he forces himself to. He sits there with his hands loose in his lap, and he thinks of the Krauts finding him. He thinks of them stripping him, taking his equipment, and bringing him for questioning, and it makes Castiel's hands tighten into fists to the point where his knuckles ache, because he doesn't know for sure how the German army treat their prisoners, but he thinks, at least he's alive, then. At least he's alright, held back just a couple hundred yards from the front-line – and when the 115th and the rest of the Division push through Gut Hasenfeld and over the Roer and into Jülich proper, they'll clear through the German lines and they'll find him.

Something is tightening like a fist in Castiel's throat. He struggles to breathe around it, but he thinks, they'll find him. Someone, somewhere, will find him.

Already, mere days after the fact, it is almost as though Dean was never here. His webbing and equipment went with him; the contents of his abandoned haversack were redistributed amongst the rest of the company; even his idiotic jokes are no longer being told, out of a kind of funereal solemnity. There is no reminder that Dean was ever here at all, Castiel thinks, and then, pulling his hand from his webbing pouch, he moves to the slope of his shoulder, remembering Dean's mouth on his skin, and he presses two fingers into the half-faded bruise until it hurts.

17th December, 1944

In the early hours of the morning, there is the distant whine of Luftwaffe overhead, a far-off chatter of gunfire, followed by the sharp pounding of the anti-aircraft artillery, and when Castiel gets up, the sky is still smoking. He fastens the clip of his helmet, and he moves through the street in search of someone who might know what is happening. He finds his eastern-most sentry first, with Private Amriel and O'Shaughnessy stood, shivering, in ankle-deep snow, their hands blue and clutching on their rifles.

“What did I miss?” Castiel asks.

O'Shaughnessy and Amriel glance at each other, both reluctant to speak. Finally, Private Amriel says, “Not sure. A couple German planes went over. I think it got taken down over that a way.” He points further down the line towards the sector of the 175th.

Castiel follows his hand, tracing jagged patterns of smoke through the sky. It lifts an unsettled, curling sensation in his stomach. “Anything else to report?”

“No, sir.”

Castiel nods and leaves them. At oh-five-hundred hours, the world is still dark and quiet; his breath mists white in front of his face as he breathes, and he digs into his combat jacket for a cigarette just for want of something to do with his hands. His fingers are cold and stiff on his lighter, and it takes him three attempts to get the cigarette to light. He inhales deeply enough that it burns all the way down.

The first that he hears of what is happening is in Battalion briefing. Major Campbell lines all the company commanding officers up to

surround a map that encompasses the entirety of the Rhineland all the way up to Essen, and all the way down along the Belgian border to strongholds such as Trier and Bitburg.

“Yesterday morning the enemy pushed back along the line of the V Corps,” Campbell starts, tracing a line just shy of the German-Belgian border with the tip of his pen. “Now, at first we thought this was a counter-offensive to take back Wahlerschleid, here, but it's becoming apparent that it's much bigger than that. As near as we can tell it, the whole fucking German army is on the move, so the 30th Division are being moved south to hold the front, meaning that the 29th is now being extended to cover their old sector. We'll be holding the line between Kirchberg and Altdorf as well as our own, so we'll be stretched a little thin, but intelligence indicates that an attack from Jülich is unlikely. Either way, we can't assault across the river anytime soon, so training is postponed in favour of holding the line.“

“So, if we can't expect an attack from Jülich, and we're taking defensive positions, what will we be doing?” asks Lieutenant Adina, an officer from Fox Company who took over from Gabriel.

“Holding the line.” Campbell glances along the row of COs. “We'll maintain a regular patrol rota – this side of the river, primarily, but we may occasionally push over the Roer for reconnaissance, prisoner snatches, and so forth.”

Castiel lifts his head.

Campbell is already looking at him. He meets Castiel's eyes, and he clarifies: “Enemy prisoners, that is.”

Castiel stares back at him and doesn't react.

Dragging his eyes from Castiel, Campbell taps his index finger hard against the map where they will be holding the line. “There's no telling how this is gonna go,” he says. “It might be a quiet month for us. Then again, we've already had one strafing raid from the enemy this morning, so maybe not. It depends how bad it gets down south, and it depends on how Heinie's feeling. If he keeps quiet, we're in for a vacation. If he doesn't, things could get real ugly for us. We're gonna be spread thin, so we'll need to be vigilant. That means doubling patrols, that means regular recon, that means maintaining good communication throughout the Battalion and throughout the 116th.” He raises his eyebrows. “Any questions?”

Cain raises his hand. “Will we continue rotating between the front-line and reserve, or does this extension of our line mean that we'll all have to--”

“You'll all be moving forwards onto your old lines to get dug in there, that's correct.”

Cain nods.

“We won't be moving down there until tomorrow, oh-six-hundred at the earliest – keeping us out of the way of the folks moving south – so you've got time to get your shit squared away.” Campbell glances between them. “Anything else?” He is met with silence, and so he straightens up from the map. “Then that'll be all. Get back among your men, start doubling up on sentry and patrol rotas ready for when we move, and I'll send a runner for you before then. You're dismissed.”

The 2nd Battalion Company COs come to attention, turn on their heels as one, and fall out – except for Castiel. He stays straight and tall, and he gazes at a point past Campbell's head, and he waits.

Major Campbell folds up his maps, and he rifles through paperwork

that he has stacked on a nearby crate, flipping through pages in search of something. Several long moments pass before he notices that Castiel is still there, and then he makes an irritated noise in the back of his throat. “You were dismissed, Novak. Why are you still here?”

“Permission to speak, sir?”

Campbell's eyes flick up towards him only briefly; his hands don't so much as falter on his papers as he shuffles and reorganises. “Granted. And for God's sake, stand easy. What do you want?”

Castiel adjusts his stance, but he doesn't relax; his shoulders are pulled up high and tense to the point that there is a dully pulsing ache deep in his old shrapnel wound. He unclips his helmet, holding it in two hands. He clears his throat. “I was wondering if you had heard anything from the 115th.”

“Not on my list of priorities, Novak.”

“Baker has twenty-three men M.I.A,” Castiel says. “There are more still from Able who weren't able to withdraw either, who were--” He can't say it. He stalls and starts again. “So – forgive me, sir, but I feel they should be a priority.”

“Last I heard, the 115th only captured the position a few days ago, and they're still clearing it. Their primary focus will be reviewing intelligence, passing on any German prisoners, and seeing if we can learn anything about what's happening with the rest of the Kraut army to the south. Then, once that is done – and only then – presumably, someone will contact us about identifying remains found at the position.”

“Remains,” Castiel says faintly. “They--”

“Nothing identified yet, Novak. Don't get ahead of yourself.”

“But if there are dog-tags--”

“I'm sure they know how to check dog-tags, Captain. My six-year-old niece knows how to fucking read – I'm sure someone over in the 115th shares that skill.”

Something hard and ugly is struggling in Castiel's throat. “But if they could just check--”

“Christ, I don't know what you want me to say, Novak,” Campbell snaps. “It was a fucking bloodbath. Last time I was down there, I couldn't exactly see a whole lot left to identify. We had more bodies than we had dog-tags and some of them we were trying to identify based on nothing more than a goddamn arm. You think you could identify any of your men from an arm?”

Castiel wants to throw up.

“Didn't think so. I understand that you don't get a lot of closure, but there's not a lot we can do right now. Put it this way – they're either dead or the Germans have got them.” Campbell tilts his head to one side. “I know which I'd rather be.”

Castiel doesn't think he can speak without his voice betraying him. He nods, jerkily.

Campbell looks back at his paperwork then, aggressively reordering

sheafs of crumpled action reports, licking his finger and flicking through page by page. “Anything further?” he asks, without looking up.

“No, sir,” Castiel says.

“Then you're dismissed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Before Castiel can turn to go, Campbell clears his throat. He doesn't look up, but he says, “Novak.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You're not at fault here.” He pauses. “Just so we're clear on that.”

Castiel says, “Yes, sir.”

He puts his helmet back on and he walks out into the gusting cold.

The land is bleak and still with winter settling heavy on it. Overhead, the sky is all roughly torn grey, clouds ragged and dirty like mangled feathers, an ashen colour like paint thinly scraped over canvas. For days on end it has snowed and snowed, falling to make any movement a great exertion of will. Castiel curls his combat jacket closely around him, his hands balling into his sleeves.

There is Sidoli and Ballard, passing a steaming mug back and forth; there is a slow chain of replacements whose names Castiel has not yet learned, and they move across the road with their arms full of new equipment that they have not yet organised. There is a cluster of men from one- and two-platoon stand huddled around a low-burning fire lit in a pothole, talking quietly amongst themselves. Castiel stands unmoving in the falling snow, and he tries to figure out what to do with the information that he has been given.

As he stands there, he watches the dismayed approach of Hanscum, who comes up beside the group where they smoke and shuffle around the fire-pit, and he says, “Shit, you heard about Glen Miller?”

Without looking up, Sergeant Milligan grunts, “What about him?” around the end of his cigarette.

“Never showed up at his show in Paris.”

Private Hutton scoffs. He has his hands deep in the pants of his combat jacket and he hunches his shoulders over in an attempt to keep out the cold. “Lazy bastard,” he mutters. “The rest of us gotta show up to our day jobs, I mean--”

“Wait, when?” Private Nickerson interrupts, and he smacks Hutton in the stomach. “Shut up, George, I'm--”

“The fifteenth. He was flying over from England but his plane never got there.”

All at once, the group becomes quiet as they realise what that means. Between them, the fire gutters and sways, casting an inconstant orange light over their boots and their outstretched, shivering hands.

Milligan is the first to speak. He says, “Shit.”

“So what, he's just--”

“He got declared M.I.A yesterday but...” Hanscum trails off with a loose shrug.

Nickerson swears under his breath. “So he's fucked.”

“Not necessarily,” Amriel cuts in, but he sounds uncertain. “I mean – maybe his plane went down in Holland or somewhere. Maybe he'll show up in a couple weeks wondering where the hell his big band got to.” He tries a nervous laugh.

“Come off it.” Hutton's words are loud, brash, and dismissive. “Everybody knows M.I.A's just the label they stick on when they can't find enough of a body to stick in a dime bag.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” The voice speaking is so cold and hard that it takes Castiel a moment to credit it to Bradbury. He has never heard such venom in her voice before. “We have men out there – good men, my friends,” she goes on emphatically, voice shaking with restrained anger, “who are missing. Have some goddamn respect.”

Hutton has the sense, at least, not to argue. He looks sullenly away at the fire, and the others, who have fallen silent around them, shift their weight uncomfortably from foot to foot and clear their throats.

At last, Nickerson says, “I never much liked *Chattanooga Choo Choo* anyway.”

“You're an asshole,” Bradbury says, and she gets up and leaves. Her scornful exit takes her past where Castiel is standing, only half eavesdropping, and as she sees him there, she stops in the middle of the sidewalk. She looks at him, and there is a split-second where something in her expression softens, and then it is gone. She says, “Captain.”

Castiel inclines his head. “Corporal.” She steps past him, and she is four or five steps away when a thoughtless idea snags in Castiel's brain and he opens his mouth to call her back before he can think about what he is doing. “Do you really think--”

She turns back. “Sir?”

He closes his open mouth. His eyes move past her, and in the far distance, beyond their sector, there is the threatening crackle and clatter of machine-gun fire. He says, “As you were.”

For a moment, Bradbury goes on staring at him, clearly unconvinced by his change of heart – but they are not friends, and now is not the time or place to go about finding common ground, and so she says, “Yes, sir,” and she goes.

Around the fire pit that Bradbury left behind, voices are raised now in argument as to whether or not Hutton is an insensitive ass, but Castiel isn't listening. His hand moves instinctively to the juncture of neck and shoulder, fingers slipping under his collar to press hard against the bruise there. He digs his fingertips in hard as though working out a muscular knot, and he feels nothing – a mild discomfort, perhaps, but no sharp blossom of pain where his bruise should be. It's gone.

Castiel tries to hold onto it, digs his fingers in harder until the muscle twinges and stings. He thinks of Dean's mouth, of his tongue, the slow scrape of his teeth.

19th December, 1944

Castiel picks up his pen. He lets himself go numb.

Dear Mr. John Winchester, he writes. He has written out this exact letter seventeen times already – the condolences, the explanation of what happened, how most of his platoon was cut off and surrounded and had to be left behind – but this is the first time it feels like a listing of his personal failures.

It is with my deepest regrets that I write to inform you that your son, Dean Winchester, Technician Fourth Grade, has been reported missing in action following an operation to--

23rd December, 1944

“Drop anything you don't need – webbing and ammo only, dump the rest,” Castiel says, as he shrugs out of his own gear. “On me in five, ready to move.”

“Yes, sir,” comes chorusing back, the men not even pausing to look up as they drop haversacks, musette bags, as they snap new clips into their rifles.

Day by day, orders come down from the brass regarding more front-

line for them to hold and more and more units are pulled south to hold off the German counter-offensive; the gravity of the situation is becoming increasingly apparent as word comes of each Allied town or stronghold or bridgehead being swallowed by the encroaching Krauts. In the meantime, all they can do is mount patrols, watch the front-line, and push aggressively across into German territory whenever they can.

The action plan is this: prisoner snatch on the outlying buildings of Jülich across the river. They'll be crossing the Roer in one of the 121st's boats, establishing RVP-1 at the shoreline. From there, they split into three groups – two smaller squads set up in overlapping arcs of fire, waiting on the order to lay down a suppressive base of fire or switch left. The assault team will push up to Jülich's perimeter clear through a small, squat house where sentries from Easy Company have detected German movement frequently over the past few days; they clear through, grab as many prisoners as they can subdue and drag – Major Campbell is hoping for three – and move out via a short flanking manoeuvre to escape recapture if the enemy should decide to fire upon the positions at RVP-2. Then, upon Castiel's signal, a squad from four-platoon waiting on the far side of the Roer to cover their retreat with mortar fire.

Technically, Castiel shouldn't be going on this mission – he should send the patrol out under the supervision of one of his platoon-leaders and a handful of trusted NCOs while he sits back, waiting, with binoculars in hand, but he is taking a personal interest. He tells himself it is out of concern for his men, of a desire to ensure first-hand that everything runs smoothly. He tells himself it has barely entered his head that they might find Dean across the river.

Through the lessening light and through the drifting, insubstantial snow, they move. The boat is ready, moored behind a swell of muddy bank to conceal it from enemy sightlines. They climb haltingly in, staggering as the metal rocks from side to side; they've practiced river crossings a thousand times at Broicher Bach in preparation for when the division are finally cleared to assault Jülich, but it's different when it's real. They have two engineers in addition to their twelve-man squad, who glare and gesture angrily for them to move up, get out of

the way, quit fidgeting – and then they push slowly from the bank and out into the water.

Castiel eyes the dark glitter of the river's surface and he thinks of kicking out desperately for air on Omaha, lungs burning with panic as he tried hard not to drown. He imagines this water will be a lot colder. His breath curls whitely from his mouth; his fingers jitter with shivers beyond his control on the metal of his rifle.

Silently, they glide across the Roer, white-knuckling the boat's edges as it rolls and twists in the current, until they bump the far side, and then they are all movement, just as practiced. O'Shaughnessy leaps out first, rushes forwards to drop into a defensive crouch, rifle pulled up, and the others follow, staggering to be clear. Sidoli stumbles, ends up with one foot in the water and flounders, splashing, in the cold; Castiel grabs a handful of his combat jacket and shoves him hard into the mud. Then Castiel follows and he slips too, misjudging the distance, and the sharp cold that floods in through his worn boot as one foot is plunged into the river cuts the air from his lungs.

They follow the other two teams up from the river, keeping low, moving fast, Castiel signalling with one hand as they move, gestures decisive and clear as silhouettes – *RVP-1 established here, fire-teams one and two double envelopment* – and then Castiel and his men drop to a knee in the cover of tangled bushes and low stone walls at the side of the road.

As they kneel in wait, Castiel checks that everyone is clear on what they're doing – flank around behind the base of covering fire, move up quick and aggressive to their objective; Amriel and Ballard get grenades in through the window, then push in to clear with Lombardi on point-man as translator; extract and get out of there.

They wait, and they wait, and then finally Castiel's radio crackles and Etheridge's voice comes through. “Baker-six, this is Able fire-team. Baker and Able fire-teams in position, ready to provide suppressive

fire, come in--”

Castiel takes the mouth-piece. “Copy that. Moving now. Over and out.” He urges his men up and they move. Running fast, heads ducked low to keep out of sight behind trees and the shell-hollowed carcasses of old automobiles, they move.

Their objective is a supply post just short of where the enemy's south-western sentry point is estimated to be, and when they are pressing up around the building on two sides, Private Jones mutters into the radio that they are in position. Some hundred yards or so beyond them, the support teams open fire on Jülich.

At the head of their formation, Amriel has a grenade in hand. He yanks the pin, releases the spoon, and he jerks to his feet and he throws. Castiel flinches back instinctively – a yell of panic goes up inside the building, and there is frantic movement – and then the grenade explodes. It shatters the windows in a burst of light, and then Castiel shouts, “Go, move--” and Lombardi rushes inside.

Castiel follows after, pushing into a small kitchen, now filled with smoke and rubble. There are four men inside – one flat on his back, jerking and thrashing on the cracked tile as blood spills up out of his open; one already dead, his eyes glassy with three chunks of antipersonnel metal embedded into his face. The other two are still alive.

"*Hände hoch, keine Bewegung*!” Lombardi shouts, his rifle pulled up into his shoulder and tracking across the soldiers scattered and sprawled throughout the room. One of the men scrambles backwards across the floor as though to hide, the other moving desperately for a pistol beyond the kitchen table. “Hey – hey! What'd I just fucking say?” Lombardi kicks a chair aside that goes skidding across the room and crashes hard into the second of the two surviving German soldiers. “*Sofort! Waffen auf den Boden und Hände über den Kopf*--”

Castiel keeps his rifle ready, but he pulls it up and moves away. “Amriel, Nickerson,” he calls over his shoulder. “Go through and clear the rest of the rooms, make sure we're not going to get a bullet in the back as soon as we leave with these guys. O'Shaughnessy, pat them down – Sidoli, start looking for any other intel we can use.” He returns to the front door, and looks out through the dark at the flashing lights and chaos of the other fire-teams covering them. As he stands there, he hears the dull pounding of a Howitzer, and the air is ripped apart by the whistle of the shell coming over. He ducks back inside. “Come on, let's get them moving, let's go.”

The building is all movement, Sidoli upending drawers and tearing apart crates in search of anything useful, O'Shaughnessy yanking the prisoners around and pulling out their pockets while the Germans clutch at their various small injuries, pale-faced and pathetic-looking. Castiel's men are not treating them kindly, and God, there is some small, angry part of Castiel that wants to inflict damage – for the hell he's been through, for everything that has happened at the hands of the fucking German army – but he swallows it down.

“Careful with them,” he mutters. “And get them some first-aid or they'll bleed out before they get back.”

Sidoli comes up to Castiel with an armful of crumpled papers. “Can't read German, sir – don't know if this is any good but it's all I could find that looks useful.”

“Thank you.” Castiel takes it from him, shrugging his haversack off one shoulder and untidily folding the papers away. He checks his watch. They've been in here for five minutes; Castiel wanted to be in and out in three. “Alright, come on, let's go – do we have them ready to move?”

“I'm gonna have to carry this one, sir, but--”

The next shell comes screaming over a lot closer, and they all flinch down as the building shudders around them, the rafters coughing sawdust as it settles. Castiel calls out, “Radio – on me!” and as soon as Jones comes rushing over, Castiel grabs at the mouth-piece. “Charlie, this is Able-fire-team – targets acquired and ready to move, how do you copy?”

For a long moment there is silence, and then the response comes back, fuzzy and indistinct with static: “Copy that, Charlie and Baker ready--”

“Alright, let's go – Nickerson, help O'Shaughnessy with that one,” Castiel calls out, pointing at the prisoner on the floor with blood puddling underneath his skin, and then he leads the way out. “Back to the boat, move--”

He drops to one knee in the snow and he watches through his ironsight as his men come spilling out of the darkness, Jülich behind them lit by muzzle-flash and exploding mortars. Once he's satisfied that they're clear, he fumbles at his throat to find his whistle. He fishes it out and blows, loud and shrill.

From the other side of the Roer, four-platoon begins firing. The mortars come shuddering over to crash down behind them and tearing up any attempts for the enemy to pursue their retreat on foot, but from the relative safety of bunkers and pillboxes, the Germans are still firing. Rounds crack sharply through the air around them, and the enemy's mortars are screaming down upon them again, closer now, exploding into smoke and metal, spitting needles of shrapnel the size of Castiel's finger.

Castiel grabs a handful of Nickerson's jacket when he stumbles, slow, in the ankle-deep snow, and he shoves him forwards. “Keep moving, keep moving--”

As one, they stagger and stumble through the snow back to the boat, where the engineers from the 121st are yelling, “Let's go, let's move it!” and Castiel ignores the staggering, unfamiliar figures hauled forwards by O'Shaughnessy and Jones. He doesn't look at them. He crouches beside the river bank and he fires back towards Jülich, firing past his men as the last few come rushing back, frantic and breathless.

“Etheridge, number them off,” Castiel yells over his shoulder as the last few come bursting out of the darkness to climb aboard.

Behind him, he can hear his men shouting out their numbers, counting upwards to check that they have everyone here, and then: “All clear!”

Castiel pulls his rifle up and scrambles into the boat as the engineers push away from the bank. They keep their heads ducked low from the gunfire that cracks overhead as they rock and shudder back across the swiftly tugging current, while four-platoon let loose a torrent of mortar fire to cover them. Castiel sits on his heels, one hand thrown out to steady himself on the side of the boat, and he determinedly does not listen to Lombardi rambling in German at their new prisoners. He doesn't look at them.

When they get off the boat on the far bank and move quickly into cover, hauling their two prisoners with them, Castiel barks, “Get them back to Kirchberg. Get them secure, strip them of any other intel, and I'll call in for the S-4 to meet you ASAP.”

All around them, there are still mortars being fired – from four-platoon, some fifty yards beyond the bank; from Jülich – and so they don't have time for relief or for victory yet. They grab their prisoners and they move up towards safety, and Castiel pushes it from his mind.

27th December, 1944

Two days ago came the order that the 29th would have to extend their lines two miles north to cover the absence of the 2nd Armoured, from Hamersdorf to Barmen – in addition to covering the 30th Infantry, and their own sector. Three regiments now hold a twelve-mile front; to say that they are thinly stretched would be an understatement. Comfort, at least, can be found in the fact that the Germans no longer seem interested in any kind of offense from the other side of the Roer. After the nineteenth, when the 29th had to endure no fewer than twenty strafing raids from the Luftwaffe, the sky has been silent, and Jülich mostly sits there like a watchful, waiting animal.

The newest concern is the rumour moving through the Division that German paratroopers have dropped behind their lines and will be creeping up attack them from the rear, but Castiel is unsure as to whether it's just more German propaganda across Axis Sally to keep them from sleeping. The Germans have their radios blaring across the river most days – sometimes including songs from home, which much of Baker appreciates, but always interspersed with irritating messages about *wouldn't you like to go home, boys?* Sometimes it's amusing, the Germans trying to use American slang to appeal to them, seemingly trying to make them homesick; sometimes they comment on the state of the American line with uncanny accuracy and lift a shiver on Castiel's spine.

Castiel sits under a stretched tarpaulin that sags under the weight of the snow overhead, and he clutches a mug of coffee thick enough to slice, but the metal seems more to be cooling under the touch of his frozen hands than it is actually thawing his fingers. He lifts the mug to sip, and then there is the crack of a rifle being fired.

Castiel lifts his head.

He isn't too worried – a cry to *stand to* would have gone up before they made contact, and the Germans are on the offensive anyway; to

see anyone here would be only marginally less surprising than to see Betty Grable on the front-line.

Castiel calls, “Hanscum?”

“Rabbit patrol, sir,” Hanscum's voice floats back from the nearest foxhole to company CP.

Castiel thought as much. “Carry on.”

He drinks the coffee – lukewarm – in three long gulps, and sets the mug down on the ground. He has been living on coffee for longer than is medically healthy, but he needs the caffeine. The line may be tediously quiet, their monotony only occasionally shattered by the high red pulse of a flare or by distant gunfire, but Castiel is restless, exhaustion pressing heavy at his eyelids. He is telling himself that he's too busy to sleep, and yet he sits here with his hands empty and nothing to do in the hours between here and tomorrow.

Castiel stands and crosses the CP to where he has empty munitions crates set up as some kind of furniture so that he can look at his maps and write his action reports without his worn paper damply disintegrating in the snow. He retrieves the pages where he has written Baker's patrol rota, and he flips idly through, checking who will be coming in next – two-platoon, third-squad, at fourteen-thirty, from their north-eastern sentry point – and who will be going out in their place.

“Sir, do you have a moment?”

Castiel looks up to see First Sergeant Masters hovering outside the CP – if it can be said to have an outside, consisting solely of shelter-halves pulled tight between trees over a larger-than-average foxhole. Masters

has a crumpled slip of grubby paper in one hand. Castiel sets down his rota. “Come in. How can I help?”

Masters ducks his head under the tarpaulin and steps down into the foxhole. He crosses to meet Castiel in three purposeful strides. “Sir, I was censoring the enlisted men's mail and I came across something that concerned me.”

“Who is it?” Montgomery has been flighty recently, distracted – or there is Tailor, who Virgil found a few days ago crying into his rations after a Dear John from his sweetheart, just in time for Christmas.

“It's from Winchester, sir.”

Castiel becomes still.

“It's just a little strange, is all, sir. It doesn't make much sense and I thought it might worry his family – especially since they'll have just found out he's--”

“Show me.” Castiel holds out his hand. He can feel a tremor in his wrist.

Wordlessly, Masters hands the letter over.

Castiel unfolds it, and for a moment, he can't even read it. He stares at the familiar handwriting, the uneven slope of it, the jagged capitals, the occasionally poor punctuation, the smear of blue ink on the paper where Dean's hand must have rubbed as he wrote. Castiel thinks, involuntarily, of the scrunching of his frown as he writes, the way he tucks his tongue into the corner of his mouth to concentrate.

Castiel reads.

Dear Sam--

His eyes move over the rough, bumpy scratches where Dean furiously scribbled out whatever he wrote first and amends himself. He moves over where Dean has written the worries he doesn't say out loud. He reads Dean's attempts to put on a brave face for his baby brother. He reads Dean's careful description of him, the loops and scrawls where he has changed his mind and written *a good commander* over whatever was there before.

Castiel has a lump thickening in his throat, and then he reaches the final paragraph, and he realises why First Sergeant Masters was concerned.

Everything's fine. It's gonna be okay, Sam. Don't worry. Everything is gonna be okay, I'm just wondering – I'm sorry, this is nuts, I know, but I'm just wondering – if I was [redacted] if I did something terrible, something really, really bad and I couldn't come back from it. Would you be okay? With me, I mean. Would you be okay with me. If I was fucked up real bad. If I was sick and I couldn't get better. You'd still – you wouldn't throw me out. You'd stay with me. Nothing's wrong, by the way. I'm just wondering. Just thought I would ask, no reason.

Castiel stares at the words until Dean's untidy handwriting blurs.

“I don't know what he's referring to,” Masters says with a shrug, “but I can imagine it would distress his family after they receive the news.”

After a long moment, Castiel remembers how to speak. “Yes.”

“I thought it'd be better not to send it, but I wanted your approval on that.”

“You have it.”

Masters frowns. “Sir?”

“My approval,” Castiel says. “You have--”

He is holding the letter so tight that he is creasing the paper.

“Thank you, sir,” Masters says, and he holds out his hand for it.

Castiel's voice is hoarse. “What are you going to do with it?”

“I thought I might give it to Charlie Bradbury. I know they were close.” Masters hesitates, his eyes flicking down to Castiel's hands, still clenched around the letter. He says carefully, “Unless you--”

“No,” Castiel says. “Give it to Bradbury.” He doesn't need it. He might grab at any last small, lingering part of Dean to cling to if Dean were gone, but Dean isn't gone. He pushes the weight of it back at Masters before he can change his mind.

Masters regards him evenly for a moment, as though in scepticism, but as he says is, “Yes, sir.” Then he inclines his head at Castiel in an approximation of a salute. “Permission to be dismissed, captain?”

“Granted.”

Masters pockets the letter and heads back out, down the line. The top of his helmet bumps the tarpaulin overhead as he climbs out, and snow comes spilling unsteadily down over the side where it has built up too high.

Castiel stares after him, silent and still. He feels he has the ink of that letter etched onto his skin, his hands. He flexes his fingers, slowly, until the knuckles pop, and then, almost before he understands what he is doing, he reaches back with distracted fingers for his webbing, and he unclips the first pouch. He digs in beneath his jumbled rations, beneath the broken stubs of pencil, until he finds what he is looking for – the scrape of rough bronze. When he pulls his hand out, he brings the crucifix with him, the chain tangled and twisted, curled around his fingers.

31st December, 1944

At twenty-three-fifty-nine, when the Rhineland is silent and still, Jülich lets forth a tumultuous, ear-splitting artillery barrage.

Castiel, who is aimlessly wandering the packed snow route between Charlie and Baker, is instantly alert – rifle pulled into his shoulder, one hand already reaching back to his webbing ofr a new clip, legs braced to start running for his platoon-leaders – when he realises that the barrage is still going, and that the shells fired land nowhere near the West Bank but explode high above them in smoky bursts of white and orange.

Castiel lowers his rifle.

All along the front-line, the 116th seems to be holding its breath as Jülich makes its deafening, ungentle music, anti-aircraft artillery booming as the Germans hail in 1945 with the greatest firework display that Castiel has ever seen. On this side of the river, the 29th Infantry Division pulled a similar stunt on Christmas Day, firing into the quiet in celebration

Castiel palms off his helmet and holds it loosely to his hip. He tilts his chin up and breathes in the cold, the gunpowder tang, the hollow stillness that echoes around the edges of every explosion. The horizon flashes white with fire, smoke unfurling slowly over the rooftops.

Castiel looks across at Jülich, illuminated by the flickering candlelight of German artillery, and he wonders if Dean is enjoying the music.

12th January, 1945

These days, Castiel mostly goes on patrols for something to do.

The line is utterely uneventful; they have sent out slow, dilligent mine-sweeping teams to clear the land surrounding Gut Hasenfeld and the Sportplatz; they trace the same weary routes through the fields and farms from Altdorf to Bourheim; they occasionally get word from Battalion on a potential enemy position still being quietly held on the West Bank, but they never take long to eliminate. For the most part, Baker sits in their snow, sludge-filled foxholes on the front-line, and they wait on news from the Ardennes.

Now Castiel just sends out patrols and writes up action reports that consist largely of *nothing to report – C. Novak, Captain Commanding.* Castiel no longer goes out expecting anything. He knows that he is as likely to turn up with his missing men from an aggressive patrol in German territory as Smead Jolley is likely to catch a baseball when it counts. The M.I.A will have to be recovered when the 29th return to

their offensive positions and cross the Roer to capture Jülich. He looks out across the river, and he prays, and he keeps himself occupied, and he prays, and he waits for word.

Castiel pulls off his ragged scarf, stuffs worn woollen gloves into the pockets of his combat jacket as his men drop their equipment and make ready to move.

Apparently, the last prisoners captured from the outlying edge of Jülich's perimeter were useful – the Battalion S-4 wants a few more. Castiel is happy to oblige, but for the fact that he has a rifle-team whose ratio of greens to seasoned veterans leaves much to be desired – a particularly jumpy replacement called Private McNamara keeps starting arguments with his squad-leader - and truthfully, Castiel is just tired.

They are forty seconds short of the time when Castiel said they would be moving out, which may as well be late, when Hanscum comes up to announce that they are ready to move. There have been some impromptu promotions since Gut Hasenfeld. Lance Corporal Hanscum is one of them.

Castiel nods. “Move them out.”

Hanscum leads the way down through the open stretch of farmland in the miles before the Roer. When they climb aboard the 121st's boats now, they are fluent, practiced, in their motions. There is some unsteadiness if McNamara as he climbs in, and Tailor slips to duck a toe in the water as they clamber silently aboard, but otherwise it is faultless – no noise, no splashing. Overhead, the moon is a gleaming silver coin, the dirt threads of cloud dipping in and out of its thin light as they stretch and shift. It casts the river palely glittering, a white glow catching of the boat's dull metal. In the distance, there are lamps lit in the windows of Jülich.

Both sides have been a great deal more lax about noise and light discipline in the past few weeks. The Germans and the Allies alike know where their enemy is, and they aren't going anywhere. If they wanted to attack, they would already know exactly where to go, but they aren't attacking. On either side of the river that cuts between them, they are simply holding the line and waiting.

The boat bumps hard into the far bank, jolting everyone forwards, and then the engineers are urging them forwards. Castiel holds his rifle close to his chest as he scrambles out, and silently he directs his squads to their respective positions with his free hand as they go.

Since their last prisoner-snatch, German defenses have tightened along the far north-western section where Castiel's men landed last time, and so tonight they land further up, a lot closer to Jülich proper. It's riskier, but it's the only way that they're likely to actually make their objective, otherwise they'll be wandering around in the dark getting shot at and achieving nothing. Two fire-teams are diverted off to lay down a base of fire in the direction of the main enemy stronghold, to cover Able fire-team as they move into an old house on the MSR; this time, Castiel goes with one of the fire support teams.

They keep fast and low as they press up around the objective. Hutton snaps his Browning tripod open, lifts his hands out of the way for Paunovic to click the belt into place; Amriel adjusts his ironsights with shivering, unsteady fingers; Jones winces as he wiggles more comfortably into the snow. Castiel breathes through chattering teeth, and he settles in to wait.

After Castiel's bones have fused and his skin is pearling blue, finally, word crackles over the radio – *assault team in position, ready to move* – and Castiel snaps off the safety catch of his rifle. His finger is stiff with cold on the trigger. He fires.

In an instant, their line is full of flashing fire, each burst from Hutton's machine-gun flickering hotly in the dark beside Castiel and leaving

him with white spots at the edges of his vision.

A harsh cry goes up from the enemy position. It takes them a moment to react – they must be thinly spread, with most of their forces gone south to the Ardennes – but then there is muzzle flash from open windows and a rattle of shivering machine-gun fire, followed by the dull heartbeat of a 66mm. Castiel breathes along the cheekpiece of his M1, fingers flexing to keep his frozen fingers from sticking on the metal, and he fires and fires until his clip snaps hotly away from him.

Someone is yelling in German, and there is movement in the tenements and houses leading into Jülich, and Castiel fires until a winking point of muzzle flash a a high window disappears, and when the shadowy outlines of enemy soldiers come spilling out into the street, he aims for the chest.

It's irrational – idiotic, even – but for one fleeting moment, Castiel looks at the flickering lights and the chaos and he thinks how easy it would be for one man to slip away unnoticed. To sneak away and infiltrate Jülich and find where the POWs being held and to remove the soldiers on-guard and to safety move those prisoners, undetected, through the dark back to the river and home.

He entertains the idea for a full three seconds before he lets it go. He pulls his rifle into his shoulder and starts firing, and he wonders if to Dean, wherever he is, this sounds like the cavalry have come. Then again, Castiel has always been good at letting Dean down.

The German mortars fall short, but still make Castiel flinch back, makes his finger falter on the trigger. It sends shrapnel hissing past them, too close for comfort, and Castiel twists to glance back towards the objective because, Christ, how long does it take to grab three prisoners? The positions at the windows are taken up by new men now, and more and more come pouring out into the street. The rate of fire is growing heavier from the enemy, and Castiel assesses – windows of the tenement, flashes of fire low to the ground centre-left

of axis at what must be a basement pillbox, and again three fingers further left, and Castiel is eyeing the high points at the top of the tenement, because it's only a matter of time before they get a real marksman up there – and the next mortar that whistles over comes far too close, spraying mud and metal to send Castiel cringing down into the snow. They need to pull back.

Castiel twists and shouts for Jones. “Get Bradbury on the radio, I want a status report on the prisoner snatch.” Keeping pressed low to the ground, he turns his head and yells, “Charlie fire-team, pull back fifty yards – peeling left, make ready to move--” He snaps the safety off, gropes at his webbing to check that everything is secure, recoils from the angry shrapnel burst of the next mortar screaming into the ground some fifteen yards ahead of them. Then he's yelling *move, move, move,* and one by one they roll to their feet.

Slipping in half-frozen sludge, they run. They move with mortars chasing them, gunfire biting at their heels, and then Ballard cries out, staggering as a round punches out the side of his hip, but before he can crumple, Hutton gets a shoulder under his arm and drags him along. They're already outnumbered – eight men providing suppressive fire, against the outskirts of an entire fucking enemy city – and the longer they take, the more enemy soldiers will join the fight, and the more likely Castiel and his men are to be killed.

When Castiel drops back to earth, he pulls his rifle up and fires off two quick, deliberate shots before his clip bursts off with a metallic clang. He tilts over onto his side towards Jones. “Private, how do they report?”

“No response, sir--”

“Try them again!” Castiel yells.

The mortars fall closer and closer every time, exploding in a hot burst of fire to spit shards of metal to cut them all to shreds. Castiel can hear every round whistle as it passes him only feet away, and he isn't imagining it: more and more Kraut soldiers are coming into play and firing upon them. It isn't long before they're outflanked and captured or killed.

For just a moment, Castiel's finger slips off the trigger. If he was captured--

He doesn't let himself think about it. He fires, and as his clip flies away with a sharp clang, he thinks how reckless, how ridiculous it would be, the idiotic romanticised notion that he could be captured with Dean, that they could plan and escape together because, of course, there is nothing they can't figure out together – reckless; ridiculous – or otherwise, that Castiel would not be averse to dying if he got to see Dean's face one last time.

There. He thinks, almost by accident, of Dean – the furrow between his eyebrows when he concentrates; the breathless, ugly bark of his laughter; the warm copper-green of his eyes; the spray of freckles over his knuckles; the uneven tilt of his smile. He thinks of seeing him again. He thinks of touching the edge of his jaw, even just for a moment, even in a dingy, unlit German cellar in the seconds before the firing squad.

Castiel breathes.

He unloads his rifle.

The radio beside him crackles into life: “--six, this is Able fire-team – targets acquired and -- to move, how -- you copy? Over--”

Castiel picks up the mouth-piece. “Able fire-team, this is the six – copy that. Get back to the boat!” He pushes the radio back to Jones. He snaps the clip back into his rifle. “Charlie fire-team, pull back, peeling from the right, move!”

The next mortar comes close enough that the explosion leaves pulsing pale dots around the edges of Castiel's vision as he hauls himself up to his feet and moves. They run, breathless; Castiel's pulse is thundering inside his head and he feels he has adrenaline crowding up into his throat, and he can't move fast enough. The enemy mortars are screaming overhead, crashing down hard to explode all snow and metal and fire, and he can hear shrapnel hissing hotly into the icy ground.

There is open ground in the hundred-yard stretch before the boat, and it is being torn up by gunfire, but there is some cover yet. Castiel yells, “Pairs alternating bounds by squad – move, move--” and he drops to a knee at the foot of a low wall, and he digs through his webbing in search of a new clip as the mortars come roaring down around them, a high and deafening whistle in his ears that makes his head ring and his skull shake.

Finally, he comes up triumphant, snaps the clip into his rifle, snags the cocking handle forwards, ready. He pulls his M1 back up into his shoulder, and that is when he notices that he can no longer hear the shell coming over.

Castiel lifts his head.

The world suddenly whites out, all noise cutting away to stifling silence.

The next time he flickers back into consciousness, he has no idea what’s happening – he can’t see, he can’t hear anything, he can’t see

but the tilt of his body suggests he's flat on his back and his mouth is wide open, his throat burning like there's something tearing its way out of him like an animal or a raw scream, a scream with lips moving, but if he's making words he can't hear them—

There's a flicker of sound now, a high, quaking whine in one ear, a ringing like church bells and beyond that there's yelling and chaos and the numb, far-away touch of a hand on his shoulder – the only thing pinning him to reality as he screams and screams, and the last thing Castiel remembers is the distinct thought that he never imagined it'd happen like this.

Chapter End Notes

> For the purpose of Selfish Writing Reasons, some history has been tweaked. What happens to B Company at the beginning of this chapter should have happened to K Company on the 6th of December, but that date was no good for me and I didn't have room on my timeline to shunt everything along, and I needed B Coy to get more involved so... @ History Nerds, fight me.

Chapter 19: Rooksdown

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for this chapter. Hoo boy. Okay. I don't want to go into too much detail up here for risk of spoiling everything, so I will just say that this chapter deals with physical disability, mental illness/suicidal ideation, and some potentially distressing stuff to do with prisoners. If any of those things concern you and you don't care about spoilers and want more details, here is a post where I have explained the warnings in more detail. Be safe!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

.

Sam Winchester does not receive a letter.

January 16th, 1945

“Captain Novak, are you awake?”

He breathes. There is a stretch of hazy off-white above him. The edges blur, fog.

“Captain Novak?”

He's home with his mother – but there is an unfamiliar voice, the accent all wrong. A hand on his wrist. He tilts his head to find the source, has to turn further and further because his vision’s all dark on one side, one eye covered – and he twists to see and he dizzies and there’s an angry pitch and roll of his stomach, acid rushing, and he vomits. The hand is on his face now, cold sponge wiping over his mouth.

“Careful, sugar, don’t hurt yourself.”

His head is pounding, the world out of focus. Somewhere beyond the spinning wheel of his vision, the woman at his side is black and her hair is pinned back by a blue handkerchief, the edges of her especially distorted. There is a high-pitched whine that shifts and crests and falls, somewhere that he can't identify. Slowly, Castiel's eyes focus, and when the image stops blurring, there's kindness and a soft smile and he realises that she is a nurse.

He tries to say, “Where am I?” but his mouth hurts and his tongue is wobbly and his voice comes out as a hoarse, wordless rasp, and there is a restrictive tightness all across one side of his face and neck as of tautly pulled bandaging.

“What's that, honey?” Her voice is shapeless in his ears and ringing, long shrill echoes.

There is a hand on his forehead. The ceiling is swelling and shrinking in front of his eyes; the lights sway in dancing patterns in front of him. It is getting hard to cling to consciousness. “Where--”

Her hand is soothing on his brow. “You're alright, Captain. You go back to sleep now. Get some rest.”

He lolls back against his pillow and drifts.

January 17th, 1945

The next time Castiel comes around, his head is clearer. His vision is still blurred and indistinct, fuzzy at the edges and especially unclear if

he tries to look left, where there is little but darkness, and there is still the same painfully tight bandaging across his head and neck, but as he blinks awake, he understands where he is.

He is flat on his back on a hard, uncomfortable mattress; there is a dull throb of pain through his entire body, but particular spots of sharp heat radiate from one elbow, from his chest and abdomen, from his face and neck on one side. A constant low whistle sounds in one of his ears, and through the blurry distance, Castiel can see that he is in a long, narrow hospital ward. On the far side of the room is a single window, through which the low, grey light of early morning is dimly falling.

“Good morning, sunshine!”

Surprised, Castiel looks sharply over – and realises instantly that it was a mistake when his head spins and his stomach churns dangerously. He sways back into his pillow and closes his eyes. He breathes through his nose, fighting the nausea that snags in his gut.

When he opens his eyes, a large, matronly nurse is at his side, fussing with his blankets; she looks up and gives him a warm smile, and that smile is vaguely familiar. “How are you feeling today?”

Castiel swallows. It feels like a knife in his throat. “Thirsty.”

“I thought you might be. Here – can you sit up?” The nurse comes over when Castiel tries and fails, and she slips a careful hand between his shoulders to help him. “There we go. Steady, now.”

With the pillow arranged behind him, he can lean back and take the mug of water – in his right hand only, as he tries to lift his left and is left breathless by the spike of pain up from his elbow that nearly

brings tears to his eyes. He drinks, greedy, with the nurse's hands steadying the mug, and he breaks off gasping when he is finished. His throat is still burning, and when he takes a deep breath to say, “What happened?” his voice sounds as though it is being dragged over broken glass.

The nurse takes the mug from him. “Not sure, truthfully,” she says. She sets about pulling the blankets around his legs, smoothing the covers. “I only know what I've seen since you got here. Burns, mostly. Third-degree, some of them. You were brought in for surgery - we had to do a couple skin grafts.”

Castiel tries to repeat, *surgery?* but his voice fails.

“Then we got, um.” She settles on one hip. Her words turn slow and thoughtful, as though she is pulling the facts from memory. “Lung contusion, some intestinal injury. You got a ruptured eardrum, some debris in your eye – your elbow's cracked. And you had a piece of metal in your shin but that's small fry.” She strokes a hand over the blanket at the side of the bed, a misplaced gesture of comfort. “If I had to guess, I'd wager you were caught in some kind of explosion. You remember anything like that?”

“No,” Castiel rasps.

His vision is still swimming, blurred and indistinct; it makes his head throb, but the ache barely registers when it feels to him as though he is broken from head to toe. He tries to remember, and bits and pieces jump out at him – the callous inside the knuckle of his index finger where his rifle’s trigger guard would rub when he walked; Hanscum picking at the grime on his toothbrush, mouth curled up in distaste; the colour of Dean's skin in the rain – but he can't concentrate on particular details.

With a great effort, he threads together the image of a small metal boat on uneven waters, the crunch of his feet through thick snow. Castiel shakes his head, lips pressed tight together, but that pulls hard at the side of his face where his bandages are wrapped tight, and his breath comes out in a shaky rush. “I don't – I can't--”

“Don’t worry, that happens,” the nurse reassures him, and she sits cautiously on the edge of the bed. “You were real badly hurt, Captain – you’re lucky your skull held.”

The harder Castiel concentrates, the more fragments of it he can find – Campbell's order for another prisoner-snatch, the march down to the water, the roar of mortars overhead; then, more broken still, he remembers the moments after. Blood in his mouth. A feeling like drowning.

“Okay,” Castiel says uncertainly. He breathes, his lungs burning, and he forces himself to relax. “Okay.”

“Now, how are you feeling if I do a couple quick tests?” the nurse asks. “Just quickly. Then I'll let you alone and you can get some rest, alright?”

Wordlessly, Castiel nods.

“Thank you, Captain. Now I'd like it if you could tell me how many fingers I'm holding up – how does that sound?”

Castiel nods and obliges, his face screwing up a little. It’s more difficult than he anticipated – even without the added complication of having one eye covered, his sight is foggy. “Three. One. Two? No, one – sorry. One. Three? Four – and a thumb.”

The nurse gives him a wry smile, too polite to tell him not to be a smartass. “Alright – and what about my badge? Can you read that? What's my name?”

Castiel shakes his head. “I'm sorry.”

“That's alright, don't worry. I'll give you a clue – it says Nurse Moseley. My name's Missouri.” Her voice is warm and smiling, even when the details of her face are indistinct. “Okay. Now close your right eye.”

Castiel’s eyebrows come together, confused. “Aren’t you going to take the bandages off?”

For a very long moment, Missouri doesn’t answer. She just looks at him, silent and still, and Castiel realises that something is wrong.

At last, she speaks. “Sugar, we don’t put bandages on burns.”

Castiel doesn’t understand.

“But – I can’t see,” he says faintly, and even as the words leave his mouth, he understands what she is trying to tell him.

He lifts a hand – his left, first, which he is able to raise about four inches off the mattress before it becomes too painful and stiff and he gives up; then his right – and he reaches across to carefully touch the left side of his face. With the gentlest of fingertips, he feels out the soft, alien give of his skin graft. The tightness, the prickling discomfort

that he had associated with coarse, taut bandaging is nothing more than scar tissue. His mouth is still open but he's stuck, speechless.

“Close your right eye, Captain, and we’ll see how bad it is,” Missouri says, her voice low and unbearably kind.

Slowly, Castiel does as she asks, and surrenders himself to absolute darkness.

“How many fingers?”

His open mouth is failing him; he shakes his head.

“What about shapes, Captain – can you see any shapes?”

He shakes his head.

“Colours?”

He can’t even answer. He has a pitching sense of vertigo, everything rushing at him, heartbeat pounding thunderous in his ears, and he can’t breathe. His stomach twists agonisingly in his gut, bile churning, and he knows that he’s going to throw up again a split-second before he does.

Missouri is there ready with a bowl, and then a cloth to wipe his mouth once he’s finished retching, and she brushes off his mumbled apologies. “Sugar, I’ve seen it all,” she says gently. “Don’t you worry one bit. Now hold tight, I'm gonna--”

“I’m blind,” Castiel announces, completely disregarding her, and his voice is shaky. He wants to hear it out loud. He wants to weigh how it feels in his mouth. “I’m--”

“We don't know that yet,” Missouri says firmly. “Just wait a second.”

She leaves him, and retrieves the doctor – a small, nervous-looking man who introduces himself as Doctor Marvin – who shines a small flashlight in each of his eyes; tells Castiel to hold his head still and follow the tip of a pencil with his eyes; comforts him again when he gets dizzy trying to do so. Marvin tests his hearing, fingers chafing over each other and snapping at each temple, and it is in defeated tones that Castiel reports back nothing but a faint low ringing from his left ear. Marvin explains that his eardrum was shattered and that they had had some fears of deafness, but promises that it may still return and to keep him under supervision to see if his situation improves.

Shakily, Castiel nods, and when Doctor Marvin is gone, Missouri pauses a moment, and then, with hesitance, she touches Castiel's hand. “I’m sorry, Captain.”

Under her touch, Castiel's hand is limp and unresponsive. He stares straight up at a ceiling he can barely see, and the only thing he thinks to say is, “My crucifix.”

Missouri leans in closer. “What's that?”

“When I was injured – my crucifix. Did I have it? Did it come with me?”

Through the fog, Castiel can just about see enough to detect Nurse

Moseley shaking her head. “You were badly burnt,” she says, and her voice is apologetic. “It was – we had to cut it away in surgery.”

“Oh.” Castiel lowers his head back to his pillow. It never did him much good but it was all he had.

January 30th, 1945

Castiel recovers. It takes a long time, but he does.

It is several more days before he is permitted out of his bed, the doctor satisfied that the bruising to his lungs and internal organs has gone down, but he can't go far. New skin knits with old across his cheek and temple, his neck and arm – he hasn’t looked in a mirror yet, so he doesn’t know how bad it really is, but it’s more or less smooth to the touch and only itches at the edge of his jaw, and for the most part it is painless.

His hearing in his left ear does not come back. In his right eye, his vision grows somewhat clearer every day, but it does not come back in its entirety. He works until he can pick out Missouri Moseley's facial features from five feet away but he struggles to read.

They put him through therapy. Castiel learns how to walk again, at first with a stick, and then with a limp, and Missouri is with him every day, checking on his injuries, and, later, helping him to walk the length of the ward. He hobbles with the hole in his thigh and the uncomfortable stretch of the skin at the slowly-healing graft donor site, but she guides him. One arm linked through his, she steers him around the obstacles he can no longer see without tilting his head right around like a horse in blinders, and she reassures him when he wobbles or stumbles and bumps into something he thought was still three feet away. If the Army has taught him anything, it is to be resilient; he adapts.

He learns to cope with the way that his balance is completely off and his depth perception is more or less fucked and that his vision spins if he moves anywhere too fast, and he learns how to compensate for the fact that he can lift his left arm about halfway to shoulder-height and no further. But not everything can be accommodated so simply.

For the first time in months, he has a bed and he is allowed to sleep in it for as long as he likes each night – no oh-four-hundred start – and he wakes up again and again with strangled terror rising in his throat. He wakes up shaking and glistening with sweat and breathing ragged; most nights, he throws up.

He is visited by doctors to test his recovery of movement, and they stand between him and the only door in the examination room and he can't explain to them why he can't breathe. The recreation room is lined with wide sash windows that look out onto a sunlit garden spilling over with flowers, and Castiel panics himself into a frenzy the first and only time he ventures in because there is no way to secure that many windows.

He can't turn off his awareness of every entrance and exit, every potential point of contact. He feels as though he has the safest rooms in the hospital inked on his skin and every time he moves anywhere he feels himself tracing his route through the map, thinking that *it's only fifty yards or so, here, to good cover; when the shell hits, here, I'll have to double-back and flank around to reach a high point for observation.*

He reads the Red Cross prisoner bulletin religiously, scanning the letters from a Corporal Donachie at Stalag VIII-A, the notices from Dulag Luft, from Oflag VII-C/Z. He is slow, leaving every new newspaper with a headache that pounds sharply for attention in the centre of his forehead, his one good eye strained and struggling, but he reads every line. He should have heard something by now. Someone, somewhere, should have heard something by now.

February 6th, 1945

“Captain Novak, C.”

The nurse behind the desk flicks through a long sheet of paper, humming distractedly under her breath until she finds what she is looking for. “Aha. Captain Castiel Novak, 116th Infantry?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

It's been only a few days since Castiel was sent back to psych and left with a slip of paper and a promise of, *these should help you to sleep*, and he is still profoundly uncomfortable with it. Even in the Rooksdown wing of the hospital, it seems every other wall is papered with '*Every Man Has His Breaking Point',* but Castiel has spent so long holding himself together with the thought that combat exhaustion is something that happens to other people that the idea of being medicated for it now turns him cold.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you, ma'am.”

He collects his sodium amytal without a concerted effort not to make eye contact with the nurse, and when he turns around, there is a disembodied voice that swears and says, “I'll be damned. Castiel Novak.”

Castiel freezes. He can't track where the voice is coming from, or how

far it is; he turns his head as far as he can without his scarring starting to hurt, and he squints to get his eyes to focus down the long hallway, but without success.

“Over here. Novak.”

Castiel looks back the other way and finds a figure moving slowly towards him in a wheelchair. Gradually, his eyes clear and Lieutenant Freddie Hester comes into focus. He looks well, aside from the wheelchair – less gaunt than he was on the Continent, his expression decidedly less constipated. Castiel tries to push his medication discreetly into his pocket out of view. Hester's eyes follow the movement. “Hester,” Castiel says. “What are you doing here?”

Hester pats the arm-rests of his wheelchair. “What does it look like?” His eyes flick over Castiel, assessing. “So what happened to you?”

“A shell,” Castiel says flatly.

“Bad luck, Novak.” Hester nods. “How long have you been in here?”

“Twenty-one days,” Castiel says automatically. Castiel has been checking the Red Cross bulletin every day. He knows that he has been here for twenty-one days in the same way that he knows it has been seventy-five days since he lost sight of Dean in the smoke at Gut Hasenfeld.

Hester's eyebrows lift. If he thinks anything of Castiel's unusual precision, he doesn't comment. Instead, he says, “So why haven't I seen you in here before?”

Castiel averts his eyes. “I mostly stay in my ward.”

“Sounds thrilling.” Hester turns a bored and disdainful glance past Castiel, at the men shuffling up to receive their dosage of painkillers or sedatives or both. “Well, I have somewhere else to be,” he says archly, and he looks at Castiel. “Enjoy your goofballs.”

Shame flushes hotly up Castiel's throat. “It's just--”

However, before Castiel can articulate any real response, Hester has clumsily turned his chair around and is wheeling himself away down the white-washed hallway with a decisive purpose that Castiel envies. He takes a pill from his pocket and he swallows it dry.

February 11th, 1945

Every other week, Castiel receives a visit from an administrative officer who wants to know how he is progressing, who makes notes on his recovery plan and asks him how he's feeling – a tired-looking man who always seems perplexed by Castiel's inability to decisively say whether is improving. Every day, Castiel recovers bodily, and he feels himself cracking at the seams.

He is stitched loosely together with goofballs and the comfort of Nurse Moseley's stories about her family back in the States, and he stays in his ward because he can't face anything else, and he is terrified that if he leaves this room and breaks down, then someone will realise that he isn't fit for military service. He isn't an idiot. He knows he'll be disqualified from active duty, that he'll never go back into combat, that his military career will stagnate here and he'll never be Lieutenant Colonel; he just needs to hold it together long enough to be stamped B-1 so that he can be sent over for garrison duty, to work as a clerk or a supply officer or in administration or in regimental support – anything.

The fear of falling apart keeps him awake at night: if he doesn't sleep, he won't have nightmares, and then he can pretend that the nightmares have stopped. He is exhausted. He feels his fatigue press on his eyeballs and pulse dully in the centre of his skull, and sharp pain flares up in his neck and shoulders and in the small of his back even when his bruises have faded to no more than a faint yellowish blur. He's rarely hungry. He takes his sodium amytal with a mouthful of water and he tells Nurse Moseley that he's an early bird and he likes to be up to see the sunrise, when she comes in day after day to find sat limply on the edge of his bed and staring, unfocused, at the wall. She says, one morning, somewhat pointedly, that a view of the sunrise might be improved by having the curtains open. He stops her before she can pull them apart. He feels exposed behind the empty glass, waiting for someone a half-mile away in a clock tower to find their target and fire.

February 21st, 1945

Hester's wheelchair is rickety, clattering loudly across the linoleum, and the ward is quiet enough that Castiel can pick out the rattle of the wheels against the murmur of patients breathing, even with his patchy hearing, and he can identify Hester's approach with his back turned. He lifts his head from where he is sat on the edge of his cot, not quite reading *Stars and Stripes*, and he watches as Hester slowly pushes himself across the floor to meet him.

“Hester,” he greets, without any particular warmth or interest.

The chair squeaks to a halt. Hester stares at him for a moment, appraising. He looks at the paper in Castiel's hands, and he says, “What are you doing in here?”

Castiel doesn't look at him. “Well, I couldn't stay in Germany, so--”

“In here,” Hester clarifies irritably, with an imperious gesture at the room around them. “As opposed to actually leaving your ward. Going into, I don't know, the recreation room--”

“I don't like the recreation room,” Castiel says.

Hester is quiet for a moment, considering this. “Too many windows?”

Castiel looks at him, and he almost wants to laugh as he realises the absurdity – that after everything, Hester, of all fucking people, is the only one who gets it. He doesn't acknowledge it. He's not interested in having anything in common with Hester. Instead, he says, “What do you want, Hester?”

“I'm leaving tomorrow.”

Castiel's eyes flick slowly down over Hester's wheelchair. “I thought you were 4-F.”

“I am,” Hester replies, irritation slipping into his voice. “I'm getting shipped back to the U.S. They're gonna get me selling war bonds. Maybe put the Star-Spangled Banner on my wheels.” His eyes flick pointedly over Castiel. “You didn't get asked?”

“I suppose having half your face melted ruins some of your celebrity prospects,” Castiel says.

Hester shrugs as though he thought as much. He is silent for a moment, his palms rubbing distractedly over the arm-rests of his

wheelchair. He gazes past Castiel, down the length of the ward, and in an abstracted, off-hand voice, he says, “You're not going to believe me, but I want to apologise.”

Castiel looks at him, bewildered. “Why?”

“Because I need to start making amends at some point, and once I leave Europe, I don't intend to ever see you again if I can help it.” Hester speaks so matter-of-factly that there is little Castiel can do to contest it. “Now – I know we didn't always see eye to eye in Baker--”

“You were a prick and I hated you,” Castiel says.

“And you were a miserable son of a bitch and I wanted you to fail.” Hester gives a thin smile. “Every mistake you made was Christmas Day to me. I lost 2IC to you because I – I *couldn't handle the pressure*, according to Ant Milton, and so I was thrilled to see you slowly buckling under it. I was good at my job, Captain.” He speaks the rank like it's an insult. “I would have been a good commander if anybody had given me the chance – but they didn't. They gave it to you, and you didn't even want it.” He is quiet for a moment, staring Castiel down. Something in his face is rueful now – not sorry, exactly, but close. “But you didn't deserve the way I treated you for all those months. My doubting you, undermining you, hating you when I had no reason to.”

Castiel shifts, uncomfortable. “I'm sure I gave you reason.”

Hester arches his eyebrows. “Your winning personality helped. But - you didn't ask to be made CO. I don't suppose you much enjoyed it. And it's not your fault you were better than me – which you were.” His voice is low and rough. He sounds as though he hates every word out of his mouth. “I was watching your every move in Europe, thinking, *I could have done that. I would've done it better.* Truthfully, I

couldn't. I don't think I could've done what you did, not for as long as you did, not nearly as well. Not with everything you got put through."

Castiel doesn't know what he is supposed to say to this. He knew all along that Hester's dislike was born of petty, vindictive jealousy, and he made his peace with it. The apology catches him off-balance. He feels he needs to forgive Hester, but he isn't inclined to, and more than anything, he listens to Hester's half-hearted admission that Castiel did a fine job commanding Baker, and he is thinking of every mistake he ever made.

"Have you heard much from Baker since you've been over here?" Castiel asks.

"No."

Castiel feels impossibly heavy. "You might have enjoyed our last assault on Gut Hasenfeld," he says tonelessly. "Almost the entirety of three-platoon was killed or captured."

Hester is silent. Castiel doesn't look at him to see him react. Hester can be standoffish and disinterested, but Castiel remembers being a platoon-leader, the sense of almost parental responsibility for the thirty-something men under your protection.

Finally, Hester says, "What happened?"

"The railway gun." Castiel breathes slowly, feeling hollowed out, scraped thin. "Spearheaded up beyond the German line to break through but instead they were – cut off. We had to pull back. We couldn't--" He is surprised to hear himself falter. "Harvelle, Doe, Shelly, Gilbert, Peterson, Fontana, Doyle, Ansley. Winchester. Twenty-three in total."

Hester says, “Winchester?”

“Yeah.”

There is a long pause, the space between them thick and awkward. “Sorry.” Hester hesitates. “You were friends, right?”

The answer is knee-jerk: *we're not friends*. Castiel opens his mouth, and he stops himself just in time. He swallows. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah. We're friends.”

Hester is quiet, sombre. “I liked him.”

“He's missing. He's not--” Castiel's head jerks as though out of the way of a hovering insect, dismissive, and something slow and unreadable settles on Hester's face. Castiel can't tell if he's relieved or sceptical, and Castiel doesn't know which would be worse to see in him – the same stupid, secret hope that Castiel has been harbouring, or the lack of it – so he looks down at his hands. “He just – he's M.I.A.”

“Has he been reported to the Red Cross?” Hester asks.

Castiel picks at his fingernails. “Not yet.”

“Right.” Hester's disbelief is palpable, now, his tone of voice carefully unassuming. By Hester's standards, it's almost warm. “So how long has it been since--”

“Not long,” Castiel lies. Nearly three months. Eighty-five days.

Hester doesn't answer, and Castiel has no peripheral vision in which to gauge his reaction without looking at him.

Eventually, Hester says, “Good thing I got taken out of the action when I did, then,” and Castiel appreciates the deflection, but there is something perverse in it, too – all it took was a hole in Hester's spine.

“When are you going?”

“I'm told there's going to be a car to London in the morning – somewhere between nine and eleven.” Hester doesn't comment on the lack of precision, but his tone says it all: *somewhere between nine and eleven,* as though they might as well have told him that a car will be picking him up at some point in the next ten years. Castiel has also been getting used to the fact that the rest of the word doesn't operate on a twenty-four-clock, giving orders down to the minute and then following through.

“Good luck,” Castiel says.

“Thank you.” Hester inclines his head, an instinctive gesture that Castiel knows bodily, somewhere between a nod and a salute. He pauses for a moment, awkward, and Castiel feels it, too – having lived out of each other's pockets for years, he feels there ought to be some kind of grand farewell between them. He doesn't know what to say to bring this period in their lives to a close; neither does Hester. In the end, he settles for, “Have a nice life, Novak.”

Castiel tries to imagine going back to Bedford now.

He never received any kind of response or acknowledgement from his cousin regarding his latest letter – the declaration that they should prepare to sell his mother's house, that he was planning to move out West – and here he is, already unthreading the stitches. He imagines haunting his mother's hallways, walking past Inias' childhood home on his way to the grocery store, avoiding Mrs. Wallace on the street, having spent more time making a mess in her house than he ever did in his own; he pictures having to once again meticulously weed the garden path and dust his mother's good china. He does his best to inject the deflating fantasy with some kind of longevity – what might he do, there, five years from now? Or ten, or fifteen? – and he comes up blank. He imagines going to Lawrence.

February 26th, 1945

Outside the hospital, winter is melting tentatively into spring. The sky through the windows is still cold, the clouds flinty and dark, but in the morning there are birds singing, and untidy scattering of crocuses poke their heads above the snow. Castiel feels brave enough, now, to take walks outside; he wraps up warm and he moves, slow and unsteady, with Missouri at his side. He is awkward with her, at first, uncertain and standoffish, but she is good at her job, and increasingly, she is all that holds him together.

There are other nurses that Castiel works with sometimes who are not as kind as she is – in particular, a tall nurse with a clipped BBC accent, who is by turns unsympathetic and sharp-tongued – but Missouri is unfailingly supportive, and occasionally just blunt enough to kick Castiel into action. She holds his two hands in hers as he struggles to breathe with panic climbing hotly in his throat, and she talks him through it – *inhale, hold to four, exhale; inhale, hold to six, exhale* – and she faces his bouts of bleak fatalism with impatience enough to make him want to do better.

His face heals, and although it is never comfortable, and he can never quite forget about it, the constant painful stretch of it where it fuses with his old skin has lessened, and he's getting used to it. Once, he saw himself in a mirror. He tries not to think about it too much. There

is no enough to do in Rooksdown to keep as busy as he would like to, but he walks the long white hallways and he reads the Red Cross bulletin. Sergeant Kisnicky has a bad cold, and Second Lieutenant Coultard misses his kid sister, and Private Marston hates the Red Cross rations coming through, but there is no mention of Dean Winchester, T-4.

March 1st, 1945

“Captain Novak – on your right.”

Castiel is interrupted from his game of solitaire by Missouri's warm voice floating indistinctly across the ward. He is glad for the direction, everything a wash of flat noise that he can never quite pinpoint, and he looks up to find Missouri walking towards him, a man in army green service dress at her elbow. He lays down his cards, and climbs inelegantly to his feet, his grip white-knuckled on the bed-frame as he hauls himself upright.

“You've got a visitor, Captain,” Missouri says, and as they come nearer, Castiel's eyes slowly adjust to find Gabriel wearing a hesitant smile.

Castiel straightens, caught in the old feeling like he needs to salute. “Gabriel,” he says.

“You know, a little birdie told me you were up here, but I had to come see for myself.” Gabriel stands heavily, favouring his left leg; he has oak leaves pinned to his lapels; his expression is unfalteringly kind, but his rigid eye contact betrays in him a desperation not be caught staring at Castiel's scarring. “Got a nice long furlough to London – thought I'd see the sights of Basingstoke while I was on English soil.”

Castiel gestures loosely around them. “Not a lot to see here.”

Gabriel laughs. “Yeah.”

“I'll leave you boys to it,” Missouri says, smiling between them. “You need anything, Captain, you just shout, and me or Nurse Talbot'll find you.”

Castiel nods. “Thank you.”

When she leaves, though, there is a space between Castiel and Gabriel that neither of them quite how to bridge.

Gabriel's hands swing a little at his sides. “How are you doing, anyway?”

Castiel doesn't bore him with the details. “Fine.”

“You're, uh – looking good.”

Castiel can't tell whether he's trying to be funny. He doesn't answer.

“I mean, okay, so the face is a little alarming, but – shit, Novak. For a while there, you were already being draped in the American flag for all I knew, so. I'm glad that isn't the case.”

That's true – at least Castiel isn't dead. He has heard it a hundred if not a thousand times: *you're lucky to be alive. You nearly didn't make it.*

You're lucky to be alive. He has heard it so many times it almost starts to feel true. He says, “Thank you.” There is a beat in which he pauses, hesitant, and then he tries, “It's good to see you.”

They fall into silence again, and Castiel tries to think whether they have ever sustained a conversation that was not about combat.

He starts with what he knows: “How is Germany?”

Gabriel chuckles a little. “Germany's fine. We took Jülich a while back. Took Munchen-Gladbach, too, and every little town in between – but resistance hasn't been the toughest. You heard what happened in Belgium?”

“Some.”

“Absolutely nuts. They threw everything they had at us, but it all got wrapped up a couple days after you got taken out. Still, things were quiet where we were – even quieter now. We're on reserve for a couple weeks waiting for the rest of the Army to catch up... hot showers, hot grub, you name it, we've got it. There's a movie theatre and everything, but I'm just holding out hope for someone to get hold of any other movie than *Stagecoach* because I'm pretty sure I can recite the whole damn thing.”

Castiel is stuck on one detail. “And Jülich?” he asks.

Gabriel pulls a face. “Honestly? Almost empty. My guess is that once they figured out how badly things were going south for them in the Ardennes, the folks holding it decided they were better off elsewhere. We got through it in a single day – but you know how it goes.”

“And my men?”

Slowly, Gabriel's smile fades at the edges. He looks at Castiel, his eyes moving across his face as though trying to read something in him, and then he says, “You didn't get my letter.”

Castiel says, “What letter?”

Gabriel's shoulders cave. His mouth flattens into an uneven line. “Shit.”

Castiel feels it in his gut. He knows.

He says, “What letter?”

There is a long moment in which Gabriel doesn't answer. He stands in the middle of the ward, stiff and awkward, and he glances away over his shoulder as though checking the exit. Castiel watches his uncertainty, the fidgeting of his hands.

Gabriel clears his throat. “Let's take a walk.”

The weight of it settles upon Castiel gradually, like rainwater making clothes heavy. He says, “Okay.”

With a quiet word to Missouri, they leave Castiel's ward behind. Castiel goes without his stick, choosing his own unsteadiness; if he has to concentrate on each wobbling step, then he has something to think about other than the dread settling like cold slime in his gut. Gabriel

offers Castiel his elbow, like they're circulating a softly lit ballroom, and Castiel ignores him, sets off under the flickering fluorescence of whitewashed hallways on his own.

They walk, Castiel with a limp, Gabriel almost dawdling. Without preamble, without warning, Gabriel says, “We think we found some of your boys. When we cleared Jülich.”

The only thing Castiel can say is, “You think...?”

“We're not completely sure,” Gabriel says, in a voice that is low and defeated. He scuffs the toe of his boot across the squeaking linoleum. “But – we're pretty sure.”

“What happened?”

Gabriel takes a deep breath, pushing his hands into the pockets of his service uniform, and he doesn't look up. “Point-blank execution, near as we can tell.”

Castiel's world narrows to a single pinprick, a dizzying spot somewhere just ahead of his boots. His step falters. It takes everything in him to keep walking. “All of them.”

“Seventeen. Some of them might have been Able, though. I know you lost twenty-three, but they lost another fifteen, so.”

“What about the others?”

“Fuck knows. Still M.I.A.”

Castiel is weightless, untethered. He keeps walking. He manages, “Who?”

Gabriel's expression is pained, uncertain. “Kid, I – to tell you the truth, it was a mess. Some we identified, some were – tricky. They've all been repatriated to get it cleared up, but for a lot of them, it was hard to tell. The building they were in got shelled a couple times. A lot of them, they – wait. Castiel. Castiel, listen to me. Stop.”

It is only when Gabriel catches hold of Castiel's sleeve, that he realises he has been striding faster and faster, walking ahead. Now that Gabriel holds him still, everything is catching up to him, an unsteady whirlpooling. Something is squeezing hotly underneath his jaw. Gabriel doesn't let go of his arm.

“Some of them – I mean, from the looks of it, it seemed like it was the ones who couldn't march.” Gabriel's voice is quiet. “The rest probably got moved north soon as they heard we were on our way.”

Castiel's throat is tightening. He doesn't meet Gabriel's eyes. “Who?”

“I don't remember. It was in my letter – Christ. I don't know. From Baker, there was... God. There was a Doyle, I think. Rouwendal. There was a Sergeant Harvelle. Laverick.” Gabriel trails off, and he takes off his garrison cap, rakes a hand sideways through his hair. “Jeez. I'm sorry, I don't remember.”

“Winchester,” Castiel says. “Was there a--”

“I don't think so.” Gabriel hesitates. “But like I said, we didn't get names for them all. The rest, they've been--”

Somehow, through the haze, Castiel hears himself say, “But you're not sure.”

“Castiel--”

“You're not sure it's them. You saw them, you – you know my men. So if you're not sure, then--”

“Don't do this, Castiel.”

“You know them, you would recognise them, you would--”

“They were pretty hard to recognise,” Gabriel interrupts, his voice hardening. “They were just in a fucking pile, Novak. They were stripped and shot in the back of the head and left in a goddamn fucking pile, and the building came down around them, so yeah, it was a little hard to tell who was who.”

Castiel doesn't believe him. Rationally, he hears himself and he thinks he's probably going fucking nuts, but his brain is trying to connect the images that he is presented with – Dean's cocky, lopsided smile, the warmth of his green eyes; a heap of greying corpses tangled in rubble. “Did one of them have a knee wound? The left knee – a bullet wound.”

Gabriel has turned from gentleness to impatience, and distantly, Castiel is aware that this is something Gabriel must have been dealing with for weeks, that it is probably something that weighs heavily on

him, and that he doesn't need Castiel's hundred-and-one questions, but Castiel can't stop. Gabriel sighs, and says, “I don't know. I have no idea. I don't remember. Like I said--”

“They were hard to recognise,” Castiel interrupts, his voice sharpening. “I heard you.”

Gabriel balks. “Look,” he says. “I'm sorry, Castiel, but--”

“Let me clear something up. I want to make sure I understand.” Castiel cuts over him again, and he has no idea of what is coming out of his mouth, only that he is speaking loud enough that his voice cracks, hard, off the concrete walls to splinter and echo the length of the hallway, and with every word his voice is turning harder. “My men were just on the other side of the river for months. They were less than less than three miles away, and there were so few Krauts holding the city that when you finally assaulted, you cleared through the whole goddamn sector in a fucking day--” The words are spilling out angry and uncontrolled and accusatory, and he can't stop, “--and we were standing down holding defensive positions for two months with our thumbs up our asses on orders from Battalion – your orders – when we could have taken Jülich on our own and got my men back.” He takes a deep, shuddering breath. “You let them die.”

“Castiel, listen to me--”

“You let my men fucking die,” Castiel says, and he feels unsteady, and that is when he realises he is shaking. “You let them die and you let them lie there rotting for weeks before you found them – you let them get fucking shelled so that they can't even be recognised, and no-one even thought to tell me.” He is stepping up into Gabriel's space, and he can’t meet his eyes, but he has this hot, shaky fury roiling in his gut and up into his throat and he doesn't know what to do with it. He has fists curled tight and he is off-balance, vertigo rearing up so that the whole hallway is spinning, and he can't quite breathe. “You're our fucking personnel officer. It is your fucking job to take care of the men

in this Battalion, and you had us on useless orders to do nothing when we could have saved them."

Gabriel stares back at him, his jaw tight. He doesn't say anything; he just waits it out, until Castiel has run out of words, and stands in front of him, breathing hard and shaking and filled with an anger so sour and cold that it tastes a lot like grief in his mouth, and he is cracked open and raw.

Then, slowly, Gabriel tilts his chin up, and when he speaks, his voice is low and cold, a thin sheen of calm stretched over his words even when Castiel can see the flash of irritation in his eyes. "Are you finished, Captain?"

Castiel's eyes fall to the oak leaves on Gabriel's collar, and then away, downwards. "Yes, sir."

Gabriel – Major Laufeyson, that is – stares him down. "I'm sorry the letter didn't reach you," he says, and his voice is still flinty, but there is a real apology underneath. "I wrote as soon as I knew."

"You don't know," Castiel says. He doesn't believe it. If something had happened to Dean, he would know. He would feel it in his body. "You still don't *know* anything."

"I should come back later," Gabriel says coolly. "You need time to process the news. I'll write from London to--"

Castiel interrupts without looking at him. "Enjoy your furlough, Major."

In the long silence that follows, Castiel can feel Gabriel's eyes on him, but he doesn't lift his gaze. “Thanks,” Gabriel says flatly, after a beat. “I plan to.”

They stand squared off in the hospital hallway, Castiel's shoulders pulled high and tense as he stares past Gabriel at an unfocused point in the middle distance, and when Gabriel finally swears under his breath and walks away, Castiel lets out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding. It shudders from him, shaky, and it feels as though someone is pulling shrapnel from his throat.

March 9th, 1945

“You're lucky you came back to England,” Doctor Marvin says, scribbling on his clipboard. “If you were treated somewhere to the rear of the line, you might well have just been shipped back out there again.”

4-F: unfit for armed service. Castiel stares down at it.

The office chair beneath him is stiff-backed and slightly rickety, one leg bent off-kilter. It does nothing to restore Castiel's sense of balance, especially with this news. He sits with his hands loose in his lap, and he looks at his paperwork, and he imagines hanging up his uniform. It's been ten years since he wore anything else.

In a voice that seems small and far away from himself, he says, “What am I supposed to do?”

“I'm recommending you for an honourable discharge on medical grounds. Isn't that exciting?” Marvin speaks without lifting his head, still jotting down the details of Castiel's incompetence. “Now, I understand, of course, that you're still being monitored and you

haven't been formally released from Rooksdown's care or anything just yet, but as soon as we have that all tidied up--" Marvin looks up, and he trails off, seeing Castiel. His voice softens, but awkwardly. "Hey. Chin up, kid. You get to go home."

Castiel doesn't want to go home. There is no way to say as much without sounding like a petulant child, however, and so instead he says, "Are you sure?"

Marvin nods. "We'll need to shuffle some paperwork on your recovery plan, first off, and you once you're formally released, we'll get you on down to the war office in London to finalise everything, and then – back to the real world with you!"

He is looking at Castiel, his face open and expectant, as though for gratitude, and so, obediently, Castiel says, "Thank you."

He signs on the dotted line.

March 10th, 1945

Castiel receives his DD-214, a month's pay in advance, a Ruptured Duck to pin to his lapel, and passage on the HMS Georgiana from Falmouth. He is permitted to wear his service uniform for sixty days; otherwise, he is a civilian.

The first few moments after he walks out of the London war office, Castiel thinks that he might take it easy – sleep in late, quit exercising, maybe see some more of the local culture than simply the pubs and bars that the men of Baker had frequented when they were stationed in Falmouth. The reality doesn't pan out like that; he finds himself unable to rest, fidgety and uncomfortable in the dead of night, and yet otherwise constantly filled with a bone-deep exhaustion that leaves

him incapable of doing anything more complex than sandwiches on the pier at lunch-time, and then sitting quietly on his wicker bench under the clouds and the wheeling gulls until the dim grey light of an overcast seaside afternoon flattens into an even, dusky darkness, at which point he resigns himself to one beer in the old Three Horseshoes and a sleepless night.

He finds a bar along Beloe Street, a small, uncrowded place with brassy music playing at a low volume from a Victrola that hisses and clunks in the background of every song. He finds a seat with a view of both doors. He goes up to get a beer, and then a glass of something stronger, and then a second, and a third.

March 19th, 1945

The HMS Georgiana pulls into the Falmouth harbour after Castiel has been staying in the town for just over a week – a little behind schedule, but he supposes with the distance covered and the bad weather that has hung over the British Isles like a dank cloak for days, it's only to be expected.

The turn-around of the HMS Georgiana is two days – time for debarkation, cleaning, and reloading – and Castiel, who only has one bag, a large duffel that weighs a little more than an M1, is then packed in to spend nine days crossing the Atlantic. He struggles with vertigo and balance even before taking into account the rocking of the ship over the waves, and so moving through the narrow hallways feels akin to a tightrope walk. He stays mostly in his cabin, a tiny, sterile, metallic thing with nothing but the shushing of the sea beyond the porthole for company.

Despite a choppy ocean and bad weather, the crossing is smooth, and the HMS Georgiana makes good time into New York. Castiel stands on the deck, carefully out of the way, as they pull in, and he breathes in the salt and smog of the city, letting the sunlight and skyscrapers and soaring cry of hungry gulls settle on his skin. In Europe, these

buildings would be targets; anything taller than four storeys would have been near-immediately levelled flat. He feels crowded by it.

When the gangway goes down, Castiel is one of the last to leave, wanting to keep himself clear of the worst of the push and rabbling queue. He hitches his duffel onto his shoulder, thanks the men standing at the foot of the gangway, and he fumbles his way awkwardly onto American soil. Underfoot, it feels much like Germany. He doesn't know what he expected.

Castiel breathes and lets himself adjust, his eyes struggling to focus.

There is a young boy with a sheet of cloth almost larger than his body bundled into his arms, and there are two sailors arguing, gesticulating wildly, and there is a crowd of men and women in civilian clothing who pour off one of the gangways, and there is a flash of olive drab somewhere – military – but it is gone before Castiel can find it clearly, and then there is a beaded man with a pipe and there is a group of men discussing the contents of a crate and another who point directions along the harbour to another boat. There are people everywhere he looks – too many. He can't see what they are all doing, and he wants to be able to decisively catalogue the men carrying crates back and forth, the men barking orders between dock and jetty, the sailors bellowing to each other up on the ships, the young boys running around to resupply after debarkation, but there are too many people.

There is so much happening that it all washes into a flat, chaotic sound, something loud and aggressive that presses in on him and throbs hotly inside his skull. He can't pick apart any words, and while he imagines that there must be someone he could ask about where he is supposed to be doing, he can't hear and his vision is starting to spin, and panic is starting to crawl up coldly into his throat. Centre-left of axis, two-hundred yards, second storey window, observe for muzzle flash; loading crane, one-fifty yards at his three o'clock; the glint of something metallic in the distance, base of loading crane, one-fifty yards at his three o'clock, possible light artillery position, flank right to clear and – he can't secure the perimeter with this many civilians –

he can't--

The harbour moves like a living thing, the crowd rolling and eddying and swirling into itself, and Castiel stands frozen, his grip so tight on the handle of his duffel that he can feel his fingernails biting into his palm, and he tries to breathe. Inhale – hold to four – release. Inhale – hold to six – release. Breathe.

March 29th, 1945

Castiel gets the eight-thirty train – pulling into the station at oh-eight-thirty-seven – through Philadelphia and Baltimore to Washington D.C, and then to Pittsburgh, to Chicago, to Kansas City, and then, at last, to Lawrence. It will take him two and a half days, but he isn't in any hurry.

He takes a series of worn bench-seats to watch an unfamiliar country unfold and scroll by, and he dozes fitfully between Philadelphia and Laurel, and he stays overnight at a lodging house in Washington D.C., in a tiny, street-facing room where he gets no rest and instead picks distractedly at loose thread in the blanket until he finds a hazy, bruise-yellow sunrise.

The next train has a carriage offering lunch that he doesn't eat, and an afternoon supper that makes him feel sick to his stomach, anxiety churning hotly in the gut. It wheezes into Lawrence just shy of seventeen-hundred, the afternoon sunlight thinning over the tiled roofs.

Castiel is still some fifteen miles from the address he dug out of United States Army files, and there are no taxi cabs available for at least another hour. Castiel feels he cannot wait that long; he checks his map and flags down a bus, climbing aboard in slow, staggering steps.

He checks and double-checks with the driver for his stop, and then he is left in the middle of a perfectly ordinary suburban street. From there, it is easy to find the Winchester house.

The house itself is a little worse for wear, but well cared-for – the white front shutters show signs of having been painted and repainted countless times; there are three small steps up to the porch, one of which is a distinctly different colour to the others, the sheen of new wood as yet unfaded by footprints. Castiel starts up a stone path that cuts through the lawn, and he climbs slowly up the steps to the porch and to the door.

Castiel takes a deep breath. He knocks.

For a few moments, there is no response; then at last there is a shape shifting behind the translucent netting, and the shuffle and click of locks.

When the door swings open, it reveals a man taller than the very doorframe, long-limbed, long-haired. In spite of his height, he can't be more than twenty years old, his face still baby-soft, not yet stubbled. A man, though: old enough to fight. He carries his weight across his shoulders in a way that is achingly familiar; his mouth twists into a confused curve that Castiel could describe from memory.

He feels himself sinking, like he could drop straight through the wooden slats of the neatly-painted porch, down into the dirt, down. He is not allowed to sink, however; he stands up straighter.

“Mr. Samuel Winchester?” Castiel asks, like he can’t already read the answer in every inch of Dean’s baby brother. He removes his hat.

“Oh, God.” Sam’s face contorts a little, his lower lip crumpling, his brow creasing up. “No. You--”

Hurriedly, Castiel says, “I'm not a notifier.”

Sam braces a hand against the door-frame. “What?”

Castiel realises too late that this was a terrible idea. “I'm here on my own,” he says.

It takes a moment for Sam to compose himself, breathing heavy, not meeting Castiel's eyes. He twists his hand nervously over the door-frame. “I – uh – okay,” he fumbles, and swallows thickly. He straightens up, and his eyes move to the pin on Castiel's collar. He gives Castiel a short nod. “Alright. I'm sorry – I just – come on in, Captain. Let me get you a coffee.”

Now that he knows Castiel isn't here to notify him of someone's death, Sam is polite, softly-spoken, and it aches like a bruise in Castiel, seeing such a marked difference between the ways Dean would posture and smirk like he owned the world, and the sweet manners in the man he raised from boyhood. Here, Castiel thinks, in the flesh, is Dean's gentleness, his patience and care, and Castiel feels his throat painfully tighten.

Sam steps back into the house, and he holds it open wide for Castiel to enter.

“I shouldn’t,” Castiel starts, but he’s already walking inside – flinching a little as he bumps his shoulder off the door-frame and has to adjust himself – and before the door is even closed behind him, he is hit with a pang of homesickness so fierce he feels his knees shake to buckle.

Dean Winchester is written on every inch of this house.

The hallway is long and narrow, painted a murky mustard yellow with clumsy children's brushstrokes. The pictures mounted on the wall don't hang straight or symmetrical, but here is the Winchester family.

There is Sam holding a high-school diploma, with Dean, already in military greens and grinning fit to burst with pride, his arm slung around his brother's shoulders. There is another school photo, hundreds of sullen-looking kids in disorderly rows, the faces too small for any one child to be identified. There is a scrawny dark-haired boy on a bicycle, smiling sunnily, and Dean stands just behind, his hand stuffed into a baseball mitt, scowling. There is Dean, chubby-cheeked in a bathtub. There is Dean on a swing. Elsewhere, holding up an unhappy-looking trout. Crying in a diaper, knuckles pressed to his eyes. Padded up in a football jersey. Younger and missing two front teeth. There is Dean.

Ahead of him, Sam pauses just before the doorway into what looks like a small, cluttered kitchen; he lays one hand flat against the wall like he needs it to hold himself upright. "The kitchen's just through here," he says, and there is a sharp note to his tone.

Castiel looks over and realises instantly that Sam, polite as he is, doesn't like Castiel looking through all their childhood photos. Castiel, for all intents and purposes, has lost a man; Sam has lost a brother, and this place is theirs.

Shame-faced, Castiel drops his gaze to the floor and follows him. "I apologise for my luggage," he says stiffly, feeling all at once terribly unprofessional and far too formal. "I haven't had a chance yet to go home, so—"

Sam looks at him.

Castiel stops talking.

In stiff, uncomfortable movements, Sam sets a pot of coffee on, while Castiel stands awkwardly in the doorway. Then Sam drags a chair backwards, the wood of the chair legs squealing in Castiel's ears, and Sam sits. “Please, sit down,” he says, and he gestures towards the chair on the other side of a kitchen table scattered with papers – copies of the Red Cross bulletin, of *Stars and Stripes.* Sam watches as Castiel fumbles to find the back of the chair, and Castiel lowers himself into the seat with a sinking sense of dread, and he can't look across the table to meet Sam's eyes.

He hasn't even introduced himself properly, and he doesn't know where to start. The idea of coming into this house and saying, *nice to meet you, Mr. Winchester, I was your brother's commanding officer and I knew him well, I'm sorry for your loss*, the same way he would with any other next-of-kin – it sits like a rock in his gut.

They sit there in a prolonged, agonising silence. Behind Sam's shoulder, the metal tea-kettle clanks a little on the burner.

“So what is this about?” Sam asks.

Castiel swallows. “I understand you've already been notified and received most of the paperwork from your Visiting Officer,” he says. “I apologise if I've come at a bad time--”

“It's fine.”

Silence again.

Castiel doesn't know what to say. He wants to introduce himself; he wants to say that he's sorry; he wants to say how much Dean meant to him; he wants to get out of here without saying another word. He doesn't know why he thought he could do this. His hands are shaking beneath the table.

He swallows. He pulls a handful of neatly-folded papers from the pocket of his jacket and sets about laying them out carefully on the table. He takes care in the presentation, focusing on the right-angles and the crisp paper to keep him from spiralling. “I have here,” he says, in a voice that is carefully steady, “the first instalment of Sergeant Winchester’s SGLI, which is life insurance benefit money to assist with any needed expenses that you and your family may be dealing with at the time of his being reported missing, as well as the last three months of his wages which I understand never reached you. I also have letters of condolences from – well – this one is from the Secretary of State – no, forgive me, that's this one – or is – no, I'm sorry.” Castiel can't read well enough to be sure which is which, but he can see, if foggily, that everything is printed in block capitals on the front, and Christ, he must look like such a fucking idiot. He can feel a humiliated flush creeping up his throat. “I'm sorry. Here it is. Yes. And this one is from me, and this one is from a service representative. They're just – they're condolences. You would have received them shortly in the mail or from your Visiting Officer, but I wanted to – I just – I felt I should speak to you in person.”

Castiel knows that he is rambling but he doesn't know how to stop. Throughout his little monologue, Sam has been looking at him, and with Castiel's faulty vision, it is hard to read expressions sometimes, but he thinks he is not imagining the way that Sam's face is turning hard.

When Castiel finally figures out how to stop talking, Sam just says, “Thanks for that.”

There is no denying it now: Sam's voice is cold.

Dread is coiling icily in Castiel's gut. He can't remember what he was going to say next. They fall again into silence, and Castiel is painfully aware of the ticking of the clock on the wall and that he is here, on the premises of official business, and he is wasting Sam Winchester's time, and intruding on his grief in awkward, overly personable way that he has no right to.

Sam is waiting for him to speak.

In a voice that is strained, Castiel says, “I wanted to say that I'm sorry.”

It's the wrong thing to say. Whatever cordiality there might have been in Sam's expression is gone now, his mouth flattened into a hard line. “Right,” Sam says.

Castiel wants to throw up. He should never have come. This is everything he was terrified of and Jesus, he doesn't know why he was foolish enough to think-- “If you have any questions,” he blurts out, panicked and desperate to salvage this, “I could--”

“Yeah, I have a question, actually.” Sam's tone promises nothing good. He sits back heavily in his seat. “Why did you come here?”

Castiel falters. “I wanted to--”

“To say you're sorry,” Sam echoes. “Yeah. I get that. Was that supposed to be for my benefit, or for yours?”

Castiel flinches.

“Because my brother is missing,” Sam starts. “Probably dead. So right now I'm sitting around with my heart in my fucking throat – excuse my language – waiting for some uniformed officer to come up and tell me they found his body in some ditch somewhere.” His voice, while once restrained, now snaps into something angry and almost vicious, and Castiel shrinks in his seat. “I'm not interested in hearing that you're sorry, and I'm sure as hell not interested in whatever self-pitying shit this is. I'm interested in knowing what the hell happened to him. You got an answer for me?”

Castiel's voice is small. “No.”

“Huh. Thought not.”

Swallowing down the anxiety that churns nauseatingly in his stomach, Castiel manages, “I should go.”

“Yeah, I think so, too.” Sam stands up, his chair scraping back loudly, and his mouth is still moving but Castiel loses all the words to the echo of the chair. Sam stands in the middle of the kitchen and waits for Castiel to get up, and then he walks him to the front door at a hurrying, unfriendly pace with which Castiel's bad leg struggles to keep up.

Sam yanks the door open.

Castiel wants to apologise again, but he knows that would be the wrong thing to say, so he lets himself be shepherded from the house with his head ducked. He goes to stumble out onto the porch, but

before he can step out, Sam goes, “Wait.”

Castiel lifts his head.

“I actually--” Sam takes a deep breath, like he can't believe he's saying this. He scrapes a hand roughly back through his hair, then scrubs that hand over his mouth. It's a gesture that Castiel has seen in Dean so many times that he can only stare at him. “Goddamnit. Yeah. I do actually have a question.”

“Anything,” Castiel says.

“But only because I don't know who else to ask,” Sam says, accusatory.

“Anything at all.” Castiel tries and fails to keep the desperation out of his voice. “If I can help in any way--”

“It's stupid.” Sam doesn't look at him. “I just – it’s a long shot, but I was wondering if you might know what happened to one of the officer's from my brother's company. A Lieutenant Novak?”

Castiel stops breathing. He stands very still. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah, I know. Stupid. I don't even know if you served together, but I don't know anything other than his name and his unit, and I don't know who to write or telegram about getting in contact, but maybe you know someone I can speak to about--”

“Mr. Winchester,” Castiel says faintly, no longer in control of his own body, so that he has no idea what is coming out of his mouth, until at last, of all the useless, ridiculous things, he hear himself say, “I got promoted.”

Sam stops talking. “What?” A frown pulls down between his eyebrows, and there is a long, painful second of silence before understanding moves slowly through his face, and his eyes fall then to Castiel's rank slide. “You're... *Captain* – Cas-teel Novak?”

There is a fierce sting building at the backs of Castiel’s eyes; Sam’s lips around the butchered pronunciation, the way he says *Cas*, is exactly the same as Dean’s.

He doesn't know what to say. Idiotically, he says, “Castiel. Actually.”

For a moment, they only stare at each other – Sam incredulous, Castiel wanting to sink through the floor.

Sam says, “Castiel.”

Castiel remembers, now, what he was supposed to say when he arrived. He comes slowly to attention, dragging himself up straight, but for the fact that he can’t meet Sam’s eyes. “Castiel Novak. Baker Company, Captain Commanding. Or – I was.”

Sam looks at him, dumbstruck, for a long time, and then he sticks out of his hand. His voice is completely different – apologetic, earnest – when he speaks. “Sam Winchester, at your service – it's an honour to meet you, sir. I'm so sorry about – I didn't realise – I mean, of course, Dean never actually described you so I didn't know, I just assumed--” Sam's handshake is firm and vigorously enthusiastic; Castiel is pulled slightly off-balance by it. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to chew you out –

are you okay? Jesus, and I – come back in, come on. I'll make you that coffee."

Castiel can't look at him. His hands are shaking by his sides; he balls them tight into fists. He breathes unsteadily. "Coffee would be great. Do you have a wash-room, or somewhere I could--?"

"Yeah, of course. Just there – down the hall, on the left."

Castiel turns too fast, and everything spins with debilitating vertigo so that he has to brace himself against the wall. He fumbles his way into the bathroom, shaky fingers knocking into the doorframe before he finds the door-handle. When he gets the door shut behind him, he gropes for the sink, and he clenches both hands tight on the ceramic, bent double, and there is a long moment in which he can only stand there, trembling.

His shoulders are pulled up tense so that a dull ache flares in his bad shoulder, in his side and his neck, and he closes his eyes. He breathes like Missouri taught him – inhale, hold to four, release. Inhale, hold to six, release. He breathes, and he breathes, and then he doubles over and retches into the sink.

When he makes his way out into the hallway, Sam is moving around the kitchen with purpose. Behind him, a fresh pot of coffee is brewing, and he is tidying up some of the mess of newspapers that were scattered about. Castiel walks down the hallway, feeling off-balance, and he carefully steers himself around the door-frame to stand just in the corner of the kitchen.

Sam looks up. "Hi – I'm sorry about earlier." He twists a dish-cloth between two hands, then seems to think better of holding it and tosses it unceremoniously aside. "I just--"

“No, I understand. I was intruding, and when you first saw me, you must have thought--”

“I didn't know you were--”

They are talking over one another, both apologetic; they abruptly stop at the same moment.

Sam says, “I'll get you that coffee now.”

The tea-kettle sits on the unlit burner, steaming profusely; Sam pours two mugs, black, and sets them out on the table with a bag of sugar and a bottle of milk. He invites Castiel to sit down, and sits opposite him. A long moment is occupied by the two of them fixing their coffee – Sam adding milk and sugar, Castiel sipping it black and being surprised to find that he is unused to the taste of real coffee, too accustomed to the B-ration sachets of caffeinated mud.

Sam stirs, his teaspoon clattering on the ceramic, and it echoes and echoes in Castiel's head.

He doesn't where to start. Castiel cups his hands around his mug, and after an awkward beat, he offers, “He talked about you all the time.”

Sam lets out a short huff of laughter. “You know,” he says, smiling down at his coffee, “I was just about to say the same thing.” He shakes his head. “Used to tease him about it when I wrote him – say how he made it sound like you were the only person in the whole company.”

Castiel can't answer that.

“You were close,” Sam ventures, after a moment, tentative.

Castiel says, “We were friends.”

They sit in silence – Sam sipping at his coffee, cringing a little when it's too hot for him still and blowing cautiously across the surface; Castiel holding his own mug loosely in two hands and tracing idle, distracted patterns with his thumbnail on the ceramic.

Sam clears his throat. “I, uh. If it's not nuts to say, I... I feel like I could always tell you cared about him – you know, even when you weren't friends. And I know he didn't always tell me everything. I know that anytime he was saying *everything's fine, nothing to report*, you know, that was – that was when it was really bad. And I know he was never gonna tell me, 'cause he didn't want me to worry, and anyway, I guess I would never understand it, what it was like. But I did worry, all the time. And those times, especially, I was just – I was real grateful for you. I knew you were looking out for him. That you'd never let anything bad happen to him.”

Hollowly, Castiel says, “Forgive me for failing in that regard.”

Sam shakes his head. “It wasn't your fault.”

It would be rude of Castiel to say what he wants to say: *you weren't there.* He doesn't say anything.

Sam drinks again, his coffee cooled to the point of comfortable consumption. Castiel's coffee sits untouched between his two hands,

his skin pebbled pink and brown and grey with uneven scarring.

Castiel asks, “How is Jessica?”

A smile lifts on Sam's mouth. “Dean told you about her?”

“Not much. He said she was pretty – and she liked… Manet?”

“Monet,” Sam corrects.

“My apologies. Dean didn’t know the difference,” Castiel says, and he doesn’t realise until the words are already out of his mouth how much that sounds like a criticism. He feels a hot flush of shame rise on his neck and ears, ready to excuse himself that it’s not at all what he meant to say, when he notices Sam grinning down at his coffee.

“No, he didn’t.” Sam shakes his head. “Dean's really smart – he doesn't like to admit it, he liked to pretend he was some kind of idiot to appease my dad, but he's smart. Better than me at science and shop, and he had a real brain for lateral thinking, but art? I don’t know. You could show him Da Vinci and he’d think it was a waste of time.” Sam pauses, and his voice takes on a confessional tone. “I mean, to tell you the truth – I was never much good at art, either. I liked looking at it, but I didn't really know much about. That's why I took art history in the first place – I wanted to know why they did it. I wanted to know how it happened. Totally embarrassed myself in the first class, and Jess had to rescue me by jumping in on my first question and making it sound like I was a lot smarter than I was.”

“She sounds good for you,” Castiel says.

“Thank you. She's at an evening class right now--” Sam cuts himself off to twist in his chair and glance at a clock on the wall behind him, which hangs somewhat lopsided but still ticks on resiliently. “Actually, she's due home soon.”

Castiel follows his eyes to the clock. “I came at a bad time.” he says apologetically. “I'll leave, I'm--”

“No, no, I was just gonna say that it's my turn to cook when she has these classes.” He smiles. “You don't mind if we talk while I sort out some food, do you?”

“Of course, that’s more than fine.” Castiel hesitates. “Do you want any help?” he asks tentatively.

Sam looks at him in surprise, and then his face slowly settles into a warm smile. “Yeah, sure. That’s a really kind offer.”

“Thank you. I mean,” Castiel says, hurrying to excuse himself, “I feel I should warn you – I’m no chef, and you might have noticed but I – I’m recently blind in one eye.” He indicates vaguely in the direction of his face, which he has not seen for himself in a long time, but which he knows must still be a horrendous mess. “So I don’t know how high a standard my food preparation will be.”

“That’s okay,” Sam says. “You can peel potatoes.” He brings out a laden sack, a cutting board, a small knife. He clears a space for Castiel on the worktop, and then moves away to fuss with a pot on the burner.

Castiel picks up the knife, pressing his thumb carefully to the blade edge. He is slow and careful in his first peeling strip, fumbling the knife a little, and he realises as he works that he hasn't peeled a potato

in ten years. His technique is wanting; it takes him some time to figure out how best to hold the knife.

As he sets aside his first naked potato, Castiel opens his mouth to speak. He hesitates. “And your father, will he be coming for dinner?”

Sam's shoulders tighten. He takes a moment, silent. Then: “No.”

Castiel wants to press for details – does that mean that their father is gone again? Does that mean that he no longer lives here? – but he knows that it isn't his place. He reaches for another potato, and he struggles for a moment to find his place within the awkward silence, and then at last, he asks, “When is the wedding?”

Sam gives a nervous laugh. “Uh. Well – two weeks ago, actually.”

Castiel flashes a half-smile. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you. I know, we weren't supposed to – we were gonna wait until--” Sam cuts himself off short. He clears his throat. “We were gonna wait. But...” He fiddles with a can opener, picking with his fingers at a curl of loose plastic coming away from the metal. He says, “We couldn't wait forever.”

It's been a hundred and ten days. Castiel is still counting. That isn't to say that he believes he loves Dean more than Sam does – he simply envies Sam for having something else in his life. Something to work towards, to look forwards to. Castiel stares down the rest of his life like the barrel of a gun.

“It was a real nice wedding, though,” Sam says, and he finally puts the

can opener to work, cranking open tins of carrots and of peas. “We got married up in Colorado – her family lives there, near Denver – as a kind of compromise, since she was gonna be staying down here with me when she promised her folks she'd move back as soon as she was done with school. It was beautiful in the spring, and we had the--”

He moves around Castiel in the kitchen, retrieving pots and pans, but he is on Castiel's left side now, and rummaging through a cupboard, and Castiel can't hear anything except the crash and clatter. Sam's voice is a faint murmur, and Castiel turns his head to follow it, but Sam is still moving – and then Sam stops, and he looks over at him expectantly.

Castiel realises he has been asked a question, and he feels shame prickle hotly at the back of his neck. “Mr. Winchester, I--”

“Sam.”

Castiel swallows. “Sam, then. I'm actually – I lost much of my hearing as well. Partially. So I don't--”

“Oh, God, I'm so sorry.” Sam looks thoroughly dismayed. “Do you need me to slow down, or--”

“No, it's fine,” Castiel says. “I just – if you could stay still. And--” His eyes flicker to the cupboard, and he doesn't say it, but Sam follows his gaze and realises.

“And not bang around with pots. That makes sense.” Sam grimaces. “Sorry.” He has a pot in his hand; he sets it down gently against the worktop. “I asked if you had family you were home to. A wife, or--”

Castiel's throat closes up. “No.” He turns back to his potatoes. He flays off long, narrow strips of skin, and he leaves clumsy nicks and wounds, the potatoes lumpy and uneven when he is finished. He swallows, not looking up, and he changes the topic. “What are we making?”

“Liver loaf, and I'm gonna mash up those potatoes. I'm still getting the hang of it – burnt the hell out of the loaf last time. I want to get it like Dean makes it, but I don't remember how he does it. Magic, maybe.”

Castiel lowers his knife. “Dean can cook?”

“Oh, yeah. Way, way better than me or – yeah. He's real good. God, he used to make an apple pie like nothing else I've ever tasted, from our mom's recipe. Heaps of cinnamon, thick and crunchy and so sweet.” Sam shakes his head. “What – he didn't tell you that?”

Castiel thinks of Dean with blood smeared across his shaking hands. He says, “It never came up.”

Sam nods, making a low humming sound of agreement or understanding, and they fall into a silence that is not quite comfortable. Sam, it seems, has expended all his small-talk, and Castiel recognises that it falls to him now to ask about their house, their family, Sam's education and his wife and his life here, but he can't find it in him to do so. They work for some time in the quiet – Castiel painfully slow with the potatoes, Sam working briskly to stir the canned vegetables together into one pot, adding handfuls of wet dark meat as he goes, spoonfuls and spoonfuls of flour.

As Sam adds the final touches to the loaf and sets the tin in the stove, Castiel turns, and he asks, “Whatever happened to Stanford?”

Sam is quiet for a long moment. He closes the oven door. “It's real far,” he says, at last. “And someone's gotta be here, so.”

Castiel shouldn't pry. “And your father, he's--”

“He's not here right now,” Sam interrupts, his voice turning sharp. He slumps, afterwards; he rests a curled fist, knuckles down, on the work-top, and he exhales. “Or – ever. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to--” He scrubs a hand over his forehead, and the gesture is all Dean, and Castiel can hear his voice in the movement – *my dad tries his best, he means well, he says I'm dumb as dirt and he's not wrong--*

“Does he know?” Castiel says, before he can stop himself. It is with surprise that he realises he is not in control of the way his voice sounds: hard, cold, unforgiving. “About Dean?”

“Yeah. He knows. He was away when we got the telegram, but he was back within a few days. Guess I didn't greet him home all too kindly. Either way, he wasn't interested in sticking around long afterwards.” Sam pauses. “He isn't coming back here, so.”

“Was that your decision or his?”

“Jessica's, actually. I wasn't sure I had the stomach. But.”

Castiel looks at him. He wants to ask how it is that Sam can afford bills, food, much less afford to go to school – but it isn’t his business. Castiel recalls how much of Dean's wages went monthly back to Lawrence instead of into his pocket, and he is fairly certain that John never had that great a part in the family finances to begin with.

“He was devastated,” Sam says, and it isn't what Castiel was expecting. “Kept saying, *my first boy. My best boy.* Like he'd ever done anything other than make Dean miserable when he was here. Like he hadn't written him a letter the week he went missing, all on how disappointing it was that Dean didn't seem to care about what he wanted anymore – Jesus. I couldn't listen to it.” He takes a wooden spoon to the sink; he puts it down with more force than is warranted, letting it clatter and splash against the dishes already amassed under a puddle of soapy water. “I couldn't have him under this roof, drinking himself stupid in Dean's name because he lost his *best boy,* I – Dean doesn't deserve to be remembered as John Winchester's goddamn – Dean should've had so much more than that.”

Sam takes a moment to breathe, deep and slow. His shoulders rise; he releases the tension there with an effort.

“I'm sorry.” Sam passes a hand through his hair. “Sorry. I didn't mean to--” He cuts himself off, retrieves a pot of water from the side, and sets it on the burner. “You didn't need to hear all that.”

“It's alright,” Castiel says, averting his eyes. He returns to his clumsy work with the potatoes. He cants his head over, and he says, “Some of it I'm familiar with.”

Sam gives a short, flat laugh. “Yeah,” he says. “I'll bet.” He adds salt to the pot that he has set on to boil, his fingertips chafing over each other. He is quiet for a long moment, stirring. “I remember when he joined up, you know.”

Castiel glances up.

“He volunteered. Didn't wait to get drafted, he – he said if he could get some real training when he signed up early, he could do some real good by the time they started pulling in all the meatheads who didn't

really wanna be there.” There is a slow smile lifting on Sam's mouth. It is all at once so different from Dean's and so achingly similar that Castiel can't look at him. “He wanted to help people, and – I was so proud of him, you know. He could've said he wanted to join the goddamn circus, and I don't care, if he picked it for himself instead of doing whatever the hell my dad picked for him, I'd be with him. Anything but that.”

Castiel echoes, “Anything.”

Whatever Sam may have been about to say, then, is interrupted by a clatter. Castiel looks across at Sam, but finds him glancing away down the hallway with a soft expression, and Castiel turns to see a young woman fussing with the front door.

She calls down the hallway, but her back is half-turned as she flicks through the mail, and Castiel can't pick out her words. He thinks that he hears Sam's name, and a laugh, and then she lifts her head to look through to the kitchen, and she becomes silent. She is looking at Castiel.

As she approaches with slow steps, the woman comes gradually into focus until Castiel can pick out her face.

Jessica is every bit as lovely as the descriptions in Dean's letters suggested – tall, with thick blonde hair, and blue eyes that are warm even when her expression is politely guarded. She has bitten nails, and a to-do list written on the back of her hand, exposed by a half-folded sleeve, and the face of her watch is badly scuffed but polished to shine. She comes in, setting down her handbag on the kitchen table, and although her eyes flicker over his face, she doesn't comment, for which he is immensely grateful; he already feels as though his organs are roiling in his gut without having to think about his mangled head.

She takes in his uniform, the hat set neatly on the kitchen table. “You're here about Dean,” she says. She looks to Sam – to gauge his expression, Castiel supposes; to see whether Castiel's presence means what she thinks it means.

“Jess,” Sam says, his voice quiet. “This is Captain Novak.”

“Novak?” Jessica repeats. “As in--” She looks back at Castiel, her eyebrows lifted, and he wants to sink through the floor. “Dean's Novak?”

Castiel can't speak. He doesn't know what he would say even if he could find his voice, and so he only nods, mute.

Her demeanour changes completely. He only realises that there was tension, hostility, in the set of her shoulder, once she relaxes; her face softens, her lips parted in something between sadness and wonder. She takes a slow step towards him.

“You're Castiel.”

She pronounces his name correctly.

“I just came to—” he starts, and he doesn't get any further. He can hear that his voice is thickening in his throat. He gestures loosely at the disorganised pile of peeled potatoes. “I'm helping with dinner.”

Jessica smiles. “Thank you,” she says. “I'm sure Sam appreciates the help.” She takes another step towards him, and she is between him and the door. Castiel's gaze darts past her and back, and then she takes his hand between both of hers, her grip smooth and warm and

reassuring, and she says, “For everything. Thank you. It's wonderful to meet you.”

Castiel doesn't trust himself to speak. He breathes through his nose, steady and slow, even as his chest tightens. He is clutching the potato peeler in his free hand like a lifeline, and he can feel that his fingers are shaky underneath her hand. He extricates himself, swallowing around the shape of irrational panic, and he steps towards the kitchen table in a pretence of reaching for his cup of coffee. It gives him cover from the kitchen window and a clean exit past Jessica, and he can breathe there.

“He has to stay for dinner, of course,” Jessica says, behind him. “You did invite him, didn't you?”

“Hey, he's prepared almost more of it than I have – it would be unfair not to.”

“Good – and it's getting nice out, too,” Jessica says, and she turns her head towards Castiel, her smile warm and inviting. “Do you want to eat out in the yard? Ooh – long as those damned pigeons haven't pooped on the chairs again.” She rises onto tiptoes to kiss the apple of Sam's cheek, a light hand grazing the small of his back as she passes him, and Castiel aches in the face of their easy, unabashed intimacy. She opens cupboard doors to retrieve crockery, cutlery, napkins, and she goes on speaking, her voice foggy and wordless with her back turned, when Sam interrupts her.

“Jess, Castiel can't hear all too well. You gotta stay still.”

She twists back to face him, apologetic. “Gee – sorry. I was asking if you'd help me lay the table.”

“Sure.”

They go out into a back yard that is small and well-loved in a disorderly way, the grass over-long, the flowerbeds wild with colour in a way that froths and spills over the chipwood border. There are a table and chairs on the back patio, made from dark wood that shows through old white paint. Castiel follows Jessica across to the table, and she carefully divests him of his cutlery, setting out three places.

She doesn't waste much time. Jessica lays out three knives, and she immediately asks, “What was he like? I never met him.”

Castiel doesn't look at her. He sets out glasses to the right hand side of the places that Jessica is setting, a quarter-inch or so above the knife. “Shouldn't you be asking Sam that?”

She tips her head over a little to one side, considering this as she flaps napkins out. “I've asked him a billion times.” She straightens up and she looks right at him. “Now I'm asking you.”

“He--” Castiel doesn't know what to say. He swallows. “He was good.” He has his feverish tangle of Dean's kindness, his patience, his forgiveness and selflessness and humour, all caught up in his throat until he can't breathe through it and he can’t say anything at all. He drags a shaky breath that feels like breathing ice water, and he says, “Do these plates get set out or are we leaving them stacked for food to--”

“Oh, that's okay, just put them anywhere.”

Castiel puts them down more heavily than he means to, and they clatter with a sharp, fragile sound on the tabletop.

Jessica stands at the far side of the table, her fingers steepled against the wood. She ducks her head, and says, “You don't want to talk about him.” There is real apology in her voice, low and abashed. “I'm sorry. It's – hard for me sometimes.” She bites at her lip. “When Sam's life is so taken over by someone I don't know.” She lets out a slow breath, and she lifts her head to look at him. “I *want* to know him.”

Her eyes on him are imploring – he can tell without looking. He fidgets with the edge of a napkin, straightening the edge to make the crease neat, rather than look at her. It isn't his job to bring her into Dean's life; it isn't his responsibility to make her feel included. He is within his right not to want to talk about him.

“Sam read me his letters,” Jessica says. “I know he was a dear friend to you.”

Castiel can't get the napkin quite straight. He picks it up and starts folding it anew, pulling sharply at the corners to get them aligned right, the way he used to when his mother would throw dinner parties. He tugs at the napkin and refolds it, and he says, out of nowhere, “He had three, maybe four jokes that he knew, and he would tell them over and over. Somehow, on the strength of that alone, he managed to gain the reputation for being the funniest man in Baker.”

Jessica laughs. Her smile is bright and warm as she waits to hear more, and Castiel is immeasurably glad that she doesn't ask to hear the jokes – a few were obscene and not worth repeating, some were just idiotic, and a few make Castiel's throat constrict with something he can't quite swallow.

“We got off on the wrong foot,” Castiel says suddenly, instead. “We met – he knocked me over in a bar in England, threw my drink everywhere. He was drunk and... unapologetic.”

Jessica's smile widens. “He sounds like a handful.”

Castiel makes a sound in his throat, somewhere between a laugh and a scoff. “He was a pain in the ass. At the time – I probably overreacted, in hindsight. He was transferred to my platoon a week later and I think I had pre-emptively made the decision to dislike him, but that was enforced by him being a pain in the ass. He liked undermining me. Joking about me, acting stupid, trying to make the rest of the platoon laugh. He thought the sun shone out of his own ass. He was unbearable.” Castiel has unlocked something – he can talk about Dean, easily and at length, if Castiel focuses only on all the things that irritated him, made him roll his eyes and tell Dean to fuck off. “He made a habit of disobedience and insubordination and improper professional conduct, and he was the best combat medic I've ever worked with--” This is coming out all wrong. Castiel can't stop himself, “--and I doubt I will ever again meet anyone who cared about other people as much as he did, and I left him behind.”

He takes a deep, steadying breath through his nose, and he realises that he has a napkin crumpled tightly in his fist, the neatly ironed linen crushed into wrinkles beyond repair. He can't explain the instrument that combat was sharpening him into, much less that Dean found a softness in him worth holding onto, or that being with Dean made him want to be better, or that Dean is the only person who has ever managed to make him feel as though he wasn't unclean. He can't find the words for anything, but something hot and awful is tightening in his chest in its place.

He says, “I should see if Sam needs more help.”

Castiel drops the crushed napkin onto the table without looking where it lands, and he turns on his heel to walk back inside. He is unsteady as he walks, his thigh aching at the skin graft, and his vision swims at the edges as vertigo spins in his gut. He bumps the door-frame hard with his shoulder, and he doesn't bounce off so much as he spins out, staggering, as the impact jolts hot, searing pain through his shoulder

and arm and side, and his vision wheels.

As he blinks back into focus and rights himself, he stumbles into the kitchen, and then he stops.

Sam is standing hunched over the sink, his back turned to Castiel, his shoulders pulled up high. He is a great deal taller than Castiel and built solidly, and he is nineteen years old and crying in his kitchen. He seems impossibly small.

Castiel says nothing; he just stands there, watching him, and then Jessica is slipping past him in the narrow space between the doorway and the kitchen counter, and she goes to Sam. She touches a gentle hand to Sam's waist, speaking softly.

Castiel stands there, surrounded by their quiet grief, his coffee still going cold on the table because he wasn't confident enough in his own ability to find it without misjudging the distance between fingers and ceramic and knocking it over, and it finally sinks in.

Dean isn't coming back.

Castiel doesn't know how he expected to feel in this moment. He thought he might cry. He thought he might throw up, the way he did when he lost Inias, but truthfully, he doesn't feel much of anything. It feels the same as it has for every waking moment since he watched the sturdy silhouette of Dean splinter out into smoke, and he supposes, now, that he knew all along.

March 30th, 1945

It takes him four days to get back to Bedford. He isn't in a hurry.

Sam and Jessica were appalled to hear that he had to get all the way back to Virginia – thinking first that he meant Bedford, Texas, and being surprised enough that he intended to get all the way towards Fort Worth on an evening train before he explained that he was going about five hundred miles further – and insisted on his staying the night in their spare room. It was a gracious offer, one that he accepted, and he lay there without thinking of Dean on the other side of the wall, and if he crossed the hallway into another room in the thin, starved hours between midnight and dawn, then it was only to see where else he might have slept in this house.

Dean's bed is narrow, rickety, but Castiel thinks that they could have pressed close together under the covers, and they would have fit just fine. They would have made it work.

Throughout the many hours that stretch ahead on his way back to Virginia, Castiel returns to that bed. He imagines lying there, being tucked between the wall and the long curve of Dean's back. He thinks of pushing his thigh between Dean's knees, sleeping in the inelegant tangle of limbs; of Dean's breath, musty and warm, over his cheek or his chest or his forehead; of being fucked by him. Dean's weight pressing him down into the mattress, the springs groaning with each careful flex of Dean's hips. He thinks of kissing him awake. Making him coffee.

Sam and Jessica were sad to see Castiel go and said a hundred times that he could stay longer if he wanted, that he was always welcome, but he couldn't do it. They forced him to leave an address with them so that they can get in touch – *if we hear anything,* Sam says, and also, *so we can hear how you're doing* – and made vague, incorporeal plans to see each other again until Jessica came in, decisive, with the dates they would be celebrating Thanksgiving, and Christmas, and that they would save him a seat. Throughout the long journey home, Castiel thinks again and again of that invitation. It’s eight long, empty months away, and he thinks of it like a lamp in a foxhole: something worth aiming for.

April 2nd, 1945

His mother's house, when Castiel reaches it, is shut up and silent. It takes him a good few minutes to open the front door, the lock turned stiff and the key beginning to rust. Inside, there are white dust-sheets draped over all the furniture; there are old cardboard boxes packed up with ceramics and ornaments. He touches the nails that jut from the faded wallpaper, trying to recall what picture used to hang there. He runs his fingertip along the stair banister and comes away sticky with dust.

Castiel toes out of his dress shoes. He has a blister flaring hotly on his left heel where the leather was pinching. His socks are worn thin, the cool of the floorboards seeping through the cotton. He remembers his reluctant return for his mother's funeral; he remembers thinking that he would only ever come back here to get rid of the place when he moved onto something better.

He sweeps the dust-sheets off the couch.

April 9th, 1945

Everyone, pull back – get the fuck out of there, Winchester – fucking move--

Castiel jerks awake with a strangled noise of terror caught in his throat, and when he sits upright, heaving a gasp around the sensation that he is drowning, his breath sounds like a sob. His vision, his brain and his gut, it's all spinning, and he gets one foot out of bed and he vomits onto the rug. He staggers, throwing a hand out to steady himself, but he is shaking badly and he can't breathe and he doesn't know where he put his rifle. It should be within arms' reach.

There is a hand at his throat, squeezing, and there is this frantic, pulsing pressure in his chest until he thinks his ribs could crack, and slowly, he comes to understand where he is. Bedford, Virginia. No-one is shooting at him. He is safe, and his men are – no. His men are not here. He is in Bedford, Virginia. He breathes – inhale, hold to four, release; inhale, hold to six, release. Hold to eight. Hold to ten.

April 15th, 1945

Castiel unpacks his duffel bag – one set of dress uniform; two shirts; PT gear; a thin, crooked collection of letters he received while he was in Europe – and its contents fill the entirety of a single drawer. He clears out his mother's house, then, instead.

He explores rooms that he was never allowed into, old shoe-boxes he was never allowed to touch. He advances through alien territory, dropping ornaments and jewellery cases and ornately decorated clocks into a bag of garbage. He finds an old photograph frame, face-down in the back of one of his mother's wardrobes – in it, his mother smiles, tender and sweet and no more than twenty years old, her arm caught in the crook of a tall man's elbow, a man younger than Castiel is now, with the same dark hair and long nose. His father is handsome, approachable. Castiel drops the photograph into the bag.

He empties his father's old desk in the study, throwing out curled letters and appointment cards and to-do lists. He pulls out the bottom drawer to see an old revolver nestled quietly amongst faded, yellowing receipts, a cardboard box of six rounds beside it.

He stares, unmoving, his hand on the handle.

He closes the drawer.

Castiel lifts his head, trying to pinpoint the sound of a double-knock somewhere around him.

He gets to his feet from the kitchen table and peers through the window, out into the garden, of the thought that it might be a bird knocking something over, or a child kicking a ball against the fence. As he looks out, the sound repeats – three knocks this time – and it still sounds to Castiel as though it should be coming from the garden, but he turns now to move down the hallway to check the front door. As he approaches, he realises that he can see a figure through the small window in the wood.

Castiel stalls in the middle of the hallway. He doesn't know who would come to see him, and for an irrational moment, he can't bring himself to get the door. He doesn't know if it's safe. He stands there, frozen and anxious, and then he takes a deep breath and he moves to open the door.

The person that he finds on the front step, much to his confusion, is a boy of about fifteen or sixteen, a large and heavy-looking bag slung over one shoulder. He has a square of off-white paper in one hand. He looks up into Castiel's face and blinks, startled. He says, “Uh.”

Castiel stares back at him. “Can I help you?”

“Hi,” the kid says after a beat, hesitant. His eyes move over Castiel's cheek and jaw, taking it in. “I'm from Western Union, sir. I got a telegram for you.”

“I'm not expecting a telegram,” Castiel says flatly. His extended family have nothing to say to him of any urgency and so communicate with

him, if at all, through letters; the U.S Army would either write or see him in person; he can't perceive why anyone would send a telegram from Europe, and he knows no-one else Stateside who would care enough to contact him.

The kid glances at the card. “C. Novak?”

Castiel falters. “Yes.”

The kid holds it out peremptorily. Castiel takes it from him, and he struggles for several seconds to focus on the print. He holds it close to his face and he reads.

Direct Wire from Western Union to:

CPT. C. Novak

1174 Whistlefish Avenue

Bedford VA 24523

April 22nd, 1945

CAPTAIN NOVAK . FOUND HIM O.K. . IN HOSPITAL NOW . SAM WINCHESTER

Castiel is staring at the paper, the words not sinking in, when the kid interrupts with, “They said it's urgent. That little UX on the top corner means I gotta wait for an answer right away.”

“What?” Castiel says.

“From you.”

Castiel lifts his head to look at the kid, blankly uncomprehending.

The kid tips his head forwards and speaks loud and slow as though he thinks Castiel is stupid. “I gotta send back a telegram with an answer from you, right away.”

“An answer,” Castiel says. “An answer to--”

The room is spinning.

The kid is pulling a telegram form and a pen out of his bag. “What do you wanna say?”

Castiel has no idea what to say. He hears his own voice as though from far away, and he manages, “Sam Winchester--”

His voice gives out.

The kid's pen is scrawling furiously across the paper and the ripping scratch of it is all Castiel can hear. The kid goes, “Mm-hm?”

Castiel swallows, tries again. “Sam Winchester stop. Where is he stop.” He doesn't get any further.

“That all?” The kid lifts his head. “Sir, you get another five words for the same price.”

Something is tightening in Castiel's chest. He can't breathe. “Tell him I went back for him.”

“Sir, that's seven words – that's gonna be an extra--”

“Yeah, yeah, fine. Fine, that's fine.” Castiel has no idea what is coming out of his mouth. He thinks that if he stops talking, if he stops and thinks-- he can't stop. His voice is thick, strangled. He pushes a hand into the pocket of his slacks, fumbling for change. “Just – fine, just say it. Just--” He comes up with the coins and doesn't bother counting them out, just pushes them at the kid until he takes it.

“Alright.” The kid collects the change into one hand and pushes it into his pocket. “You gonna sign off, sir?”

There is pressure crowding the back of Castiel's throat. “Yes – I – Captain Novak. Nan Oboe Victor – sorry. N-O-V-A-K.”

“Got it. Anything else?”

Castiel opens his mouth and finds that he can't speak. He can't breathe. He has this tension in his chest and in his throat, everything tight and hot and stretched taut enough to snap. He shakes his head mutely.

The kid smiles. “Thanks. See you later, sir.” He knocks a sloppy two-fingered salute off his forehead, stuffs the telegram into his bag, and then he is gone, taking the steps down from Castiel's front porch two at a time.

Castiel shuts the door. He is shaking. His legs are wobbly beneath him. He doesn't think he can keep himself upright but for his hand on the doorknob, clutching so tight that his knuckles are showing whitely through the skin.

He tilts slowly forwards, presses his forehead against the door, and he tries to breathe. He is shaking beyond his control, so violently that what remains of his vision is blurred beyond recognition. He makes himself run through the breathing exercise that Missouri Moseley taught him for when everything gets to be too much – he inhales, holds, counts to four – he makes it to two and finally, the pressure bursts. His breath snatches out raggedly and he makes a small, bruised sound, and he inhales, makes it to three, but it isn't working. He counts up to ten, then to twenty, then to thirty, but nothing is working.

He can't see, and he can't breathe, everything pulling tight in his chest and in his throat so that every time he tries to inhale he makes this choked, ugly noise, and slowly, Castiel realises he is crying. For the first time, since he came home, since he landed on Omaha Beach, he is crying and he can't fucking stop, and Dean is alive. Dean is okay.

His hand is balled into a fist against the wood of his childhood front door, nausea pitching sharply in his gut, and he hitches in ragged gasps of air as he shakes apart.

Chapter End Notes

> Uh... surprise? yeah, I think I owe you guys an explanation, if you want one.

Chapter 20: Lawrence

Chapter Notes

Buckle up, nerds.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

20th April, 1944

SLAPTON

[UNSENT]

Dear Sir,

I enclose the instructions you asked for – Removal of Stick From Ass, Chapter 3, Section 1.

1. Bend over.

2. Firmly grasp stick.

3. Remove stick. Or alternatively, go fuck yourself.

Yours sincerely,

D.Winchester T-4

–

Sam writes to Castiel. His initial telegram is followed, some days later, by a series of letters, in which he explains as much as he knows – that Dean was found in a prisoner-of-war camp near Cologne when the Allies cleared through; that Dean had an infection develop in his knee when he was being moved between camps and so arrived at Stalag VI-G delirious and incoherent, where he was badly ill for some time. Sam doesn't go into detail about Dean's illness, but Castiel has seen enough of sepsis in combat aid stations to know how bad it can be. From what Sam says, it took a while to contact anyone from the 29th Infantry to get them down to the cigarette camp in Antwerp where Dean was being held in order to identify him. He is treated at a hospital there,

and at a hospital in England, and now at another hospital in England to provide physical therapy – after the amputation, Sam explains.

Castiel writes to Sam. He checks that Sam is treating Jessica right, and that Sam's cough is getting better, and how Jessica's classes are coming along, and that the thorns rising aggressively in their victory garden are being suitably cowed by the white vinegar solution that they are experimenting with. He keeps an eye on them, from nine hundred miles away; he is a great deal closer than Dean is, and somebody needs to make sure that Sam is taking care of himself.

May 18th, 1944

FALMOUTH

[UNSENT]

LT Novak--

It's past light-out but I'm gonna get no fucking sleep til I write this down even if all I ever do is tear it up, so – you're a good man, LT. Good leader, good lieutenant, whatever. You just need to quit flipping your wig every fifteen seconds and breathe. Maybe quit yelling at me for trying to help – because I am, by the way. Trying to help, that is. LT Wallace thought it was funny – everybody else thought it was funny, so maybe the piece of the puzzle that's wrong here is you. So I went a little too far. I'm sorry, but if being in the infantry means having no fun and being miserable about combat 24-7, then send me back to the 104th. God knows you'd sleep a little easier for not having me around – I mean, I know you don't like me, but would it kill you to have some subtlety about it? Quit being such a goddamn asshole all the time. That's my advice, you stuck-up goddamn asshole. I respect the hell out of you and you're a good platoon-leader but if you don't quit picking at me I'm gonna lose it.

D.W

--

He hangs up his uniform properly, in a closet with a lock, and he puts his dress shoes away into a box. He finds slacks, a plain cotton shirt, loafers. He gets a haircut, and he goes running, and he takes sodium amytal, and he walks a route he knows from memory.

He follows the unevenly sloping pavement and he cuts away through the park, and he comes at last to a yellow-painted house with green trim. He stands on the front step, towering over a painted balustrade etched with the inches he chased all the way up to *CASTIEL, 1932,* with *INIAS, 1932* just an inch or so behind. 1930 was the first year he was old enough to see through the window without standing on tiptoes; Inias, who at thirteen was still waiting for his growth spurt, remained an indistinct cloud of fair hair through the fogged glass for a long time after. Castiel knows where the spare key is, tucked under a particular pebbled rock that sits just shy of the azaleas that climb the left-hand rail; he knocks instead.

Back towards the park, children's voices are raised in excitement, yelling and chattering in a wordless wave of noise. Castiel tilts partway back towards them, fingers picking agitatedly at the crease of his slacks, and instinct has him stepping backwards to put the corner of the porch between them, and then the door opens.

Eleanor Wallace's hair is not pinned up straight, her blouse unironed, her skirt dusted with clear white handprints in flour and salt. She looks at him, her eyes moving slowly over his cheek and jaw and neck, and Castiel still is trying to find the courage to start with, *I'm sorry, I'm so sorry*, when she starts to cry.

“Eleanor,” he says, strained, and she interrupts him.

“I heard from Mrs. Hanscum.” Her voice is thick and accusatory. “I heard you got hurt. I heard and all I could think was, *not my boys, not both my boys*.”

Castiel says, at last, “Mom,” and she wraps him in a hug that hurts and goes on hurting.

June 7th, 1944

VIERVILLE-SUR-MER

[SCRIBBLED ON A SCRAP OF NOTEPAPER]

LT Novak B-COY CO – Casualty report dated 07.06.44

Pvt Scott (A-COY transfer) KIA – penetrative wound between ribs, liver damage & organ failure

Pvt Stewart Blake (1P) – femoral artery puncture right leg, penetrative wound left knee – relocation to Reg. Aid station, est. 2-month recovery

Pvt Lyle Rourke (2P) – shrapnel laceration to face

T-4 Sgt D Winchester (1P) – idiot, pulled muscle

– – did good today LT and yeah I'll take better care of myself next time. You let me know how that shoulder's treating you – if it gets real hot and itchy you gotta tell me straight away. Thanks for the coffee, keep it up

--

On the second of May, Castiel goes to buy milk and is bombarded with copies of *Stars and Stripes,* posted in every window of every store, in the hand of every civilian he passes, handed out by jubilant paper boys. Radios in kitchen windows and on grocery counters sing the same song as is blaring on the front of every paper in enormous block capitals: *HITLER DEAD*. In the street, women flock together on street corners, noisy and excited.

“--all be over soon, I guess!”

“Well, they've still to worry about--”

“--but my Teddy said they already had Jerry on his heels so--”

“--and there's still Japan, of course, but I'm sure--”

Castiel buys a copy. Suicide. The Germany Army announces Grand Admiral Dönitz now in charge, and that the war will continue without the Führer, but Castiel doesn't believe it. There’s this slow ripple that he feels through his body, from his shoulders and gradually down, a settling that he recognises as the moment he gets the all-clear from a platoon-sergeant – position captured, gunner secured. He can only think of relief in these terms now: threat eliminated. He knows that there is always the Pacific Theatre of Operations, but it isn’t often that Castiel trusts a gut-deep sense of safety, and he breathes easy on the walk home.

July 16th, 1944

BAYEUX HIGHWAY

[DESTROYED]

I'm going nuts. I'm going nuts for sure. There's no way I'm reading this right. You-- I just gotta get this down. Let them think I'm writing to Sammy because fuck knows I got nobody else to talk about this. Sometimes with Novak it's – unclear. Whether he trusts me or not, whether we're friends, whether he’s – I gotta be overthinking this. This doesn't mean anything and it's not like that except I think it could be and Jesus I want it. I want him. I'm going nuts and I might lose my job and I want him.

--

Baker Company, Castiel hears, are on reserve in the Bremen enclave after pushing north to meet the Soviet forces, clearing any remaining German positions and rounding up straggling soldiers where they find them. They play basketball, and First Sergeant Masters finally gets involved, leading the replacements from one-platoon to an unlikely victory.

Virgil writes letters like he writes action reports – succinct, brisk, and completely without feeling – and his descriptions of the company are lukewarm at best. Bradbury – Sergeant Bradbury, rather – writes more at length. She fills in the gaps in Castiel's memory: the shell that exploded mere feet short of his position during the Jülich prisoner snatch; the near-unanimous surprise that he even survived long enough to make it to the aid station; Virgil's reluctance at finding himself the new CO, but that he is doing a good job in spite of it, and led them well through Jülich and Munchen-Gladbach. She is excited by the war drawing to a close in the European Theatre, and explains that she has accrued eighty-seven points for her Advanced Service Rating, and as such will not be redeployed to the Pacific. She is going home.

It seems that word is spreading of Castiel's injury and discharge; Sergeant Barnes writes from Harrisonberg, Corporal Lowell from Blackstone; Sergeant Lafitte writes from Clayton, Louisiana. Their letters are brief, informative, and awkwardly grateful, thanking him for his command, explaining where they have gone back to their families or begun to pursue a new career. Castiel doesn't hear from Hester. He is not quite disappointed.

Word comes, finally, from Gabriel. He is no longer on Battalion staff, but acting as the Regimental S-4's executive officer, which is a hell of a promotion. Castiel writes to tell him what he knows of Dean; he writes that he hopes others have been found in prisoners-of-war camps and can be returned to their families; he apologises for his behaviour in England; he hopes to see him again soon, once all this is over.

July 25th, 1944

SAINT LO

[SENT, UNREAD]

LT--

Please don't just immediately rip this up – hear me out. Please. There was obviously some kind of misunderstanding, I don't know what happened. I thought we were on the same page. Not that I'm on any page in that way. I'm not like that, I swear to you. I like girls and I got girls back home who asked me to write them that I should probably be writing, and I didn't mean to – I didn't mean it. I don't know what happened. I guess I just thought the way you were acting that you [redacted].

It was a huge fucking mistake is all. Please don't tell anyone. Please can we just forget about it. Or just – tell someone I fucked up, get me transferred, whatever you gotta do. If I have to leave all these guys behind and go wiping the asses of the 506, then fine, I'll do whatever. Just don't send me home for this. It was a mistake.

D. Winchester T-4

--

Castiel turns twenty-nine. He celebrates by going to his father's desk, pulling out the bottom drawer, hauling it up into his arms, and walking it outside to tip the revolver and box of rounds into the trash. He finishes clearing out his mother's house.

He bundles up dust-sheets and he cleans, wiping down wainscoting, scrubbing at damp. He stacks up cardboard boxes upon cardboard boxes, neatly packed with delicately glossed ornaments and decorative lampshades, patterned fruit-bowls and polished towel-stands. It takes him the best part of a week to summon the courage to start carrying things down to the thrift store, and after a backfiring automobile engine parked along the sidewalk leaves him spiralling and unable to

breathe, he finds another way forwards. He sets out on the street – *FREE TO GOOD HOME* – and he explains to curious children poking through the fine china and old books that he is starting over. He has a good life waiting for him and he wants to go find it.

August 16th, 1944

LANRIVOARÉ

[UNFINISHED]

LT--

You gotta stop avoiding me. Look, let's just – get it out of our system. Right? Let's not pretend we're gonna get married and go home and raise chickens and live off the land, okay, but you're stressed as all hell and you could do with a break, and I – I don't have an excuse. Jesus. I just – I guess you were right and I'm just desperate. I don't care either way.

You and me, sir. This war's a goddamn shitshow but you and me could have a little fun while we're here. Get a little spring in your step, that's all I'm saying. I ain't asking you to go steady, but if you're in, I'm in. God knows we could--

–

The war is won, and it is just under a thousand miles to Lawrence.

Castiel is booked onto two buses and three trains, through Charlotte and Nashville and St. Louis, and he will have to get a cab from the rail station at Lawrence to the Winchester household. It will take him four days, and it doesn't feel long enough. There is this one last, long road, between them, and then there is Dean, alive in a way that for months he has only ever been in Castiel's dreams, and Castiel is terrified.

September 29th, 1944

MAASTRICHT

[UNSENT]

Here's the thing: I don't get why I'm still here. That's what keeps getting at me, because I fucking deserve better than this. You arrogant, self-centred, cowardly fucking prick, I don't give a shit how cut up you are by what happened, you don't get to take it out on me. I know that. I know *that, and I'm still giving you fifth, sixth, seventh chances, and I wish to God I could just not give a shit about what happens to you. And Jesus, even before this – even before LT Wallace got his chest crushed – it's not like we were Bogart and Bergman. Fuck. If I could flip some lever in my head and just stop giving a fuck, I'd be swell, but I can't, and I'm here awake past oh-three-hundred when I gotta be awake in less than an hour, thinking how the last time I saw you your hands were shaking and you couldn't look straight at me and I want to tell you to go fuck yourself but I still want you. How fucked is that. Even broken and bitter and totally fucking off the rails, I still want you.*

--

Castiel wants to think that he has been getting better; he is not sure if it's true. On V-E Day, Castiel braved a trip to the bar, of a mind to celebrate with a few glasses of something strong. He was in slacks and a grey Oxford shirt, crisply buttoned up, but he was easily identified as military in spite of his efforts – *the way you hold yourself,* a woman near the bar explained, although Castiel thinks that his scarring seemed a more reliable indicator. He was congratulated and thanked and made uncomfortable ten times over, and the barman popped a battle of champagne.

The patrons counted down, *three, two, one,* and when it detonated, Castiel reacted on instinct: he hit the floor.

He shattered the celebratory atmosphere completely, and he climbed up onto his feet, shaky and humiliated and trying to breathe easy under some thirty bewildered stares, to apologise.

Now Castiel makes his way through the rail station at Charlotte, the cold fingers of panic at his throat, and – too many people, no way that he can maintain surveillance on all of them to track whether they are enemy or civilian – his muscles lock and he drags air in – a hot white glint at the ticket office at his eleven o'clock, three-hundred yards, but it's only the reflection of sunlight on polished glass – and his chest is cracking open and he can feel that his heart is about to burst – defilade from the wide front doors between the benches and security barrier, if he can only get there to take cover.

He doesn't go for cover. He goes for the men's washroom and he throws up, retching into a grimy sink until his fingers whiten on the porcelain. He wipes his mouth, splashes his face with cold water.

October 11th, 1944

SCHLEIBACH

[UNSENT]

Castiel--

"I'm sorry."

Look how easy that is. You got more syllables in your goddamn name – why is this so difficult for you? The worst part is I know you are sorry and I know you know you fucked up and you want to make things better, and that's why it's so goddamn frustrating to watch you spiral because you don't know how to talk to me. And Christ, this is coming from me. I ain't exactly the mascot for healthy communication, okay, I know it's not easy. I mean, I'm sorry too. I'm sorry I pushed you, I'm sorry I got between you and LT Wallace, I'm sorry I fucked up your knee. You're scared. I get that. Shit, I'm scared, and I'm especially scared of what you're doing to yourself because it doesn't take a goddamn doctor to see that if you keep this up any longer you're gonna shatter.

And I get it. I get why you were so scared of us now. Because – shit. Because you lost Wallace and it gutted you and I thought I figured out why and that felt like metal in my throat, and I realised I couldn't drop you if I wanted to, 'cause you were saying you didn't even know what love feels like and I was just thinking, you idiot, you asshole, it feels like this.

D.W

–

Castiel has planned what he is going to say. *Hello, sergeant. It's good to see you again. I'm glad that you're well. Please forgive my intrusion. I merely wanted to express my gratitude for your services in Europe, and my regret that I was unable to prevent your being captured. I'm sorry. I went back for you. I went back for you.*

He has planned suitable topics of conversation for the dinner table. He'll ask after Sam and Jessica – Jessica's art; Sam's law pursuits. He'll tell them about his applications to become a math teacher, and he has rehearsed a joke: *if I can babysit Joe Harvelle and Ed Zeddmore to keep them from accidentally shooting themselves in the foot, then actual children should be easy.* Then, in a moment of nerves, Castiel worries that the joke might be in poor taste. Dean was captured with Harvelle, and Zeddmore was killed at Gut Hasenfeld. Perhaps it would upset him. Perhaps he shouldn't mention the war at all. Perhaps he should never have come.

Anxious nausea rolls in his gut again, and he grips the fabric of his seat cushion tight.

November 7th, 1944

SETTERICH

[UNSENT]

Cas--

I don't know what I'm doing here. It's a little after oh-two-hundred and I'm hunched over in the mud and rain and I don't have anywhere to go with all the shit I got in my head so I guess I'm writing it down. All I know is I got, like... this jar of insects in my chest, I swear, every waking second of every fucking day over here, and it used to be just every time someone gets hit or I hear someone yell for me that it would start up wriggling and jostling and churning up in itself til I think I'm gonna chuck, but recently it's constant, this heaving, crawling, awful feeling. And I look at you and it all stops. That's what I got.

I mean, you're about as funny as a bag of rocks and you grouch at me and you never fucking smile, but I don't wanna fucking be here anymore except for you. And I know it's crazy, getting this stuck on someone I can never take home, and it's never gonna go anywhere. That's what I keep saying. I keep kicking myself saying, remember he's gonna go home without you and you're gonna go home without him*,* and it's never gonna go anywhere. *So I know. I'm not stupid. I know, I know, and we're here getting shot at – you especially – and who knows, maybe when this whole thing is over and I get a good look at you without mud all over, I'll think you're not all that goddam handsome after all, and I'll--*

Who am I fucking kidding.

--

At Chattanooga, Castiel's carriage is joined by an elderly woman in a worn coat, who carries with her a pungent cheese sandwich that she insists on sharing with Castiel, and who talks to him at length about her beautiful granddaughter in Dalton for four stops.

From Murfreesboro, he is joined by a young woman and her small son, who grows bored of his toys within a half hour, and asks Castiel in no uncertain terms, what is wrong with his face.

The woman is horrified, snatching at her son's arm. “Jack, that's awful – you mustn't--”

“It's alright,” Castiel says. “I don't mind. I was in a fire, and I was badly burnt.” Not strictly true, but he doesn't suppose the boy's mother will much appreciate a detailed explanation of what happens when a shell detonates next to you.

The woman nods. “Where were you serving?” she asks gently.

“France and Germany.”

Another nod. “My Frank was in North Africa.” She adds, “You must have been very brave.”

He doesn't feel brave. They are coming up on Nashville, now, and his heart is beating very fast.

December 3rd, 1944

KOSLAR

[UPDATED AND DISCARDED]

Cpt. Novak B-COY CO – Supplies report dated 12.03.44

Morphine – syringe x6

Gauze bandaging – roll x5

Sulfa powder – packet x11

Scissors – x2 (Fitzgerald short)

– – I've been thinking. See, I can't figure out where I stand in a world where you're not good enough because what does that make me? I mean, shit, you've got your faults but I have too and we're working on it. And you're not the asshole I bumped into in Plymouth, and I know I'm sure as hell not that jackass anymore, and after everything we've been through, I think we deserve a goddamn break. And I know you don't want me to say this to you, but – Jesus. I'm so fucking in love with you. I know we don't have a whole lot of time and maybe I'm nuts for thinking we could ever be anything but I want that with you. I want you to make Sam laugh like you make me laugh, and I want to you two to talk about books or history or whatever, and I want to be there thinking, this is my family. This is my fucking family and I earned this. I went to war for this. I struggled and I fought for the right to go home and be happy and I – fuck, Cas. It can't be that crazy. It can't. We're gonna make this work, because when I go home, you're coming with me, and I don't care what else happens.

--

Castiel takes a hotel at Clarksville. He pulls the blankets off the cot bed, and curls on his side on the floor, punching the thin pillow into an uneven flatness. He stares at the ceiling, sleep evading him, until dawn comes thinly through the curtains, pink and grey and yellow.

His bag is already packed and upright, ready to move out.

Castiel rehearses in his head. *Hello, sergeant. It's good to see you again. I'm glad that you're well. I went back for you.*

December 26th, 1945

JÜLICH

[DESTROYED]

Dear Cas,

I think I'm gonna die here. Can you fucking believe it?

I surrendered immediately. I'm sorry. I wanna tell you I was brave, and I spat in their faces and told them to go fuck themselves, and I took three of them out with my bare hands, and that I didn't tell them a damn thing – but none of that's honest. I put my hands up straight away and I said, I remember I said, I surrender I surrender Christ please don't shoot us. *And they didn't. And I told them everything. They barely even had to ask me, I was just – fuck, I was so fucking scared. I told them where we were stationed and what our next move was, and what parts of the division we were moving with. I gave them coordinates. I gave them everything. And I guess the man upstairs was looking out for me after all because their field surgeon got shot through the eye that day and they were fucked except for me. I mean, I'm no surgeon, but I've seen it done. I know what to do.*

My knee is killing me and I'm trying to pretend it barely hurts and I'm doing what you told me, Cas. I'm making myself valuable, saving lives of important people, I'm making them need me, and I'm useful right now, because I'm all they've got, but as soon as that's not true, I don't know if they're gonna kill me. I seen them do it. Joe, he couldn't move, he couldn't walk, and they – he – I don't know what else to do except make myself useful. I'll clean their fucking boots if I have to. I'll do what they want if it means I can get back to you. I don't want to die here. I want to see you again, I want so much and I don't wanna fucking die.

Dean

--

When the train pulls into Lawrence rail station, the sun is high and hot overheard, the yellow light thick like butter as it spills over the concrete, glints off the polished locomotive engine, paints the world hazy with summer. Castiel can feel sweat collecting under his shirt.

He hoists his bag in one hand. He makes his way to the bus-stop.

Mercifully, the bus is quiet. He and the driver are accompanied out of Lawrence only by a young mother and her a quiet, watchful toddler, by an elderly man whose fingers shift and fidget on his stick.

All across the bus window, there are the tiny black flecks of squashed insects, hundreds upon hundreds, spattered and dead against the glass. Their bodies beat and twitch with the wind; the window rattles in its frame, and a handful of them go spiralling off beyond the edge of the road. Castiel counts them, to ground him, as his nerves flutter and spike with every dwindling mile.

February 12th, 1945

STALAG VI-G, BONN

[LOST]

KRIEGSGEFANGENENPOST: POSTKARTE

cas my knee is killing me. It's so fucking hot in here and i wannt to sleep. Cas i'm so in love with you. I want to go home. I want to go home to you. Youre here somewhere youre maybe youre a hudred miles away. I could find you. If I could get out of walk out of bed o this camp I could

everything is falling after apart I dont know where I am but they had to. My leg its fucked cas and it hurts so fuckng bad. Tell sam im coming home real soon. Tell cas I wish we could of

ARB. KDO 1324

–

By the time Castiel reaches the house, the golden heat of the afternoon is fizzing into a peach-edged, hazy lateness, the low light catching on the half-shuttered windows and shimmering. As his vision focuses, he finds neatly tilled lines of brown earth alongside one edge of the porch; there is a shovel abandoned in the front yard, and a basket of grubby flower-bulbs.

The house is almost exactly as it was last time – the clapboard siding unevenly white, the sun catching on a low, sturdy chimney like a sundial to throw long shadows away from it – and Castiel looks on it like a mirage. His heart is going so fast he feels faint. He can hear his pulse thud and stutter inside his ears. His mouth is coming up dry. Pressure is building in his chest.

This was a mistake. He can't breathe. He shouldn't have come.

22nd June, 1945

LAWRENCE

[RECEIVED]

Dear Captain C. Novak,

Congratulations, firstly, on your honourable discharge from service. I'm told you were also injured in Germany. I'm sorry to hear that. I have had a strange time of it since last we saw each other. It's a long story, and maybe one day I'll tell it to you. For now, everything is fine.

I apologise if my writing to you is something of an inconvenience, Captain. I wanted to express my gratitude for your command of Baker, to say that I have the greatest of admiration for you, and to make sure you know that I'm alright and [redacted]. It wasn't your fault.

Thank you for your visit to my family. My brother said that you made

great mashed potatoes. He liked you, and said you're a little different probably to how I remember you. It's okay. I'm a little different to how you remember, too.

It was an honour to serve with you, sir, and if you're ever out Kansas way, then I'm sure my family would be real honoured to express their gratitude properly. I make a mean apple pie, sir. And I'm still thinking about getting that fish.

Sincerely, yours,

Dean Winchester T-4.

--

Castiel climbs the porch steps, one at a time, his shoes clicking against the wood.

He breathes. *Hello, sergeant. It's good to see you again. Hello, sergeant.* He knocks on the door.

For several long, excruciating moments, Castiel stands on the front step and waits, with the distinct sensation that his stomach has crawled up into his throat and is swelling hotly there to suffocate him. Then there is slow movement in the hallway, faintly visible through the netting.

The door opens, and Castiel forgets everything he was going to say.

Dean looks more or less the same, when Castiel's vision at last focuses on him: Castiel doesn't quite know what else he expected. He is as tall

as ever, if a little narrower in the shoulders, thinner, paler. His hair is shorter than Castiel is used to, and neatly cut; the scars through his forehead and along the side of his neck are faded to a dull pink, faintly ridged with the old imprint of stitches. He has new scars, too: something thick and ugly at one temple, ragged into his hairline, and his nose is not quite straight now. He has a stick tucked into one armpit, and no left leg below the thigh. He is wearing a shirt which is soft, and dark blue – a colour that Castiel has never seen him in, and which suits him enormously. His eyes move over Castiel's face, his reaction to the burns admirably restrained to a slight lifting of the eyebrows, a slight parting of his lips. He is as freckled as he was in Normandy, and as painfully handsome as he was in Brunssum, and his mouth tilts up at one side in a small, crooked smile, and everything in Castiel swells and aches and bursts and breaks, and he doesn't say anything.

After the seconds have stretched into summers, Dean speaks first, his voice soft. “Hey, sweetheart.”

Castiel says, “I love you.”

It's all he remembers. It's all there is.

Dean's smile stretches wider, and he is illuminated by it. Faintly, Castiel can hear voices behind him – Sam's recognisable low tones, and Jessica's high, lovely laugh. “Fuck,” he says, rough, but warm underneath. “I – Cas--”

His voice cracks, and he makes one shuddering, unsteady movement towards him – and Castiel sees in his head again the moment at Gut Hasenfeld when Dean's leg buckled beneath him, and Castiel thinks, *he's going to fall* – and without thinking, almost before he understands what he is doing, Castiel rushes forwards and catches him in his arms.

He has a fistful of the front of Dean's sweater and a hand on his shoulder, and Castiel drags him forwards and he must misjudge the distance between them because he crashes into Dean hard – but then Dean has a hand in the back of his hair and an arm around his neck and he presses his face into Castiel's shoulder, and Castiel has two arms around him, tight enough to bruise, and he doesn't know how to let go. There is a clatter, and Castiel realises only once the stick hits the floor that he is holding Dean up.

His arms tighten around him; his hands curl into the fabric of Dean's shirt, clenching until his knuckles hurt, and he pushes his face into the side of Dean's neck and he exhales in a shaky burst. He lets himself breathe. Dean is clinging too tight, setting off a dull pain sparking through arm and shoulder where Castiel has third-degree burns and skin grafts and shrapnel wounds, but Castiel will take it if means that Dean is here with him, warm, solid, alive against all odds.

“I love you,” Castiel says again into Dean's shoulder, and his voice is breaking. “I love you.”

Dean's breath into the skin of Castiel's neck and shoulder is wet, a little unsteady. His mouth is moving, forming fragments of words, but he is pressed into Castiel's deaf side and his words get lost. Castiel doesn't care. He doesn't care about the lost air between them. He doesn't care about the shifting sands ahead, the things people might say, the way strangers might look at them. He doesn't know how they will make it work, if at all, but if he believes in anything, he believes in Dean, and he is here with him and the summer is lit up with tiny impossible mercies.

Then Dean is shaking badly, unsteady, and his hands slide down to the slope of Castiel's shoulders, and he is holding on too tightly, his fingers digging in painfully, and he says, “Cas, I'm gonna--”

“Hold on, I've got you.” Castiel steadies Dean with his hands and steers him carefully to lean on the door-jamb – which he sags against

gratefully – and then Castiel ducks to retrieve Dean's stick. He fumbles, groping clumsily, unable to pinpoint for a moment how far his hand is from the handle, and then he straightens up with it. He helps Dean to shift his weight from the wall to the stick, and he is still trembling even with it tucked into his armpit, and he doesn't quite meet Castiel's eyes.

“Sorry – I--” Dean's voice gives out. He clears his throat and tries again. “Got real sick. In Germany.”

“I know,” Castiel says. “You worried me.”

“Would've wrote if I could. I don't really – I don't remember a lot. From round about January, it's all – it's pretty broken, I don't--” Dean’s eyes are red. He swallows. “I was real sick.”

“I know,” Castiel says. His hand is still on Dean's arm, smoothing down from shoulder to elbow to his freckle-dusted knuckles. “I know.”

“And you – you went back for me. Sam said--”

Castiel's breath catches. “Of course I went back for you.”

Dean lifts his head to meet Castiel's eyes. He doesn't say anything. Shaky and uncertain, he looks at Castiel, and Castiel, with his hand still resting gently on Dean's wrist, smiles.

Slowly, Dean's mouth lifts to smile in echo, and then the quiet is disturbed by a ripple of noise from somewhere in the house. Castiel can hear a shout – Sam's voice, indistinct, Dean's name somewhere in there, but Castiel can't pick out the words – and Dean turns sheepish.

“Sorry,” he says. “Uh. Come on in, then, sir. You need a hand?”

“Thank you. I'll be alright.” Castiel hauls his bag up onto his shoulder, careful and slow to keep from tipping himself off-balance, and then he reaches forwards to find the door-frame, to ease himself through, and he finds his fingertips grazing over the hem of Dean's shirt instead. “Sorry. I--”

Dean takes his hand. The green of his eyes is warm and incredible, the dwindling sunlight casting a hazy light on him, catching at the ends of his eyelashes, and his thumb brushes over Castiel's skin, the back of his hand. He steers Castiel through the door, helps him over the front step.

Through the glimpse of the street and sky afforded before the door is shut, the afternoon is quiet and still. There are cicadas creaking in the flowerbeds, and a basket of fat brown bulbs waiting their turn for planting. Overhead, a narrow twist of swallows flank left for home.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

> Okay. I'm gonna delete this later and have this kind of emotional shit stowed somewhere else, but let me have this. I have been writing this for five years. I have been writing this for so long that I kind of can't imagine my life without Ninety One Whiskey, without these characters. Now, I'm going to be super embarrassing and thank a whole bunch of people, like this is the fucking Oscars or some shit, because you know what, I've been working on this for a quarter of my entire life-time and it was really hard work and it never would have happened without help, so I'm going all Oscars acceptance speech on this bullshit and you nerds can't stop me.
>
> I want to thank all the various people who have been my

springboards at various points in the creation of fic – Grace and Kat, when this idea was in its infancy as 'what if I wrote a little fic about Dean and Cas as soldiers'; Lew, for helping me with the history when I was getting started; Dani, who I promised would be written into the fic as a flickering light during a scene that then got cut from the story (sorry); Askance, Ren, and Sandra, all of whom at various points had me divebombing into conversations with them like 'THIS IS A DISASTER HOW DO I FIX IT'; lastly, Alex, my other dorkier half, who demanded to proof-read all my porn without any ulterior motives, and who gave me endless ideas, and who saved my butthole when I realised, 200,000 words into the story, that I didn't like where it was going and I wanted to change everything.

Additionally, I want to thank Ren again, for creating incredible art and a cover for 91W that makes me kind of want to weep every time I look at it, everyone else who has created wonderful sad things for 91W, from art to graphics.

I want to thank everyone who has stuck with me on this ridiculously long and overwhelmingly angsty journey – and a special mention to the small, but dedicated little mini-fandom that I somehow inspired along the way, of whom I was surreptitiously and quietly aware all along, and whose love and excitement and occasional dismay was a great source of motivation and validation by turns.

And last but not least, I want to thank the 29th Infantry Division. The real MVPs. Thank you for everything.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!